

Claudia

by

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A PINNACLE BOOK

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ULTIMATE PASSION

IT had been a beautiful night and she loved him more than ever in the morning. "If it weren't real love," David told her, "if it were only physical, it wouldn't be that way."

Claudia, who was eighteen and who did not know very much about love, had the greatest respect for her husband's superior knowledge of sex. Not that he'd ever led a wild life, or run around, but he'd read a great many books on the subject and knew as much as a doctor. He'd always wanted to be a doctor, but he'd got sidetracked into architecture. Some day he was going to do a great modern cathedral and be known all over the world, but at present he was employed by the firm of Armstrong and Killian at a salary of a hundred dollars a week, which was pretty wonderful, Claudia thought.

It was certainly more than enough to live on. They paid eighty-three dollars and thirty-four cents rent every month for two rooms and a kitchen in a converted apartment house near the East River, and Claudia was learning to manage so expertly that her savings account boasted a balance of three hundred and twenty dollars plus interest—which David thought was pretty wonderful. Of course, she reminded him honestly, there hadn't been any extra expenses to speak of—she had enough clothes from her trousseau to last a year, and she had practically been able to furnish the place on wedding presents. Not actual presents, but cheques. They'd been utterly ruthless when it came to things like candlesticks and bon-bon dishes, and except for a few second and third cousins, who still lived in the Dark Ages and sent monogrammed napkin rings and fruit bowls, they'd managed to convert most of their gifts into cold cash. Consequently, their small apartment bore none of the earmarks of the newly married.

Instead of orientals, for example, Claudia chose a black rug for the living-room and a white one for the bedroom, which turned out to be a little impractical, because she had to put newspapers down for the superintendent whenever he came up to stop the

radiators from hissing. If she didn't, he would leave white footmarks on the black rug, and black ones on the white. In the beginning, this would distress her immeasurably, and she would get down on her knees and rub the palms of her hands across the imprints—but David told her not to be neurotic, if you couldn't walk in your own home, what good was it? Besides, he liked things to look worn instead of new, and pointed out that fabrics grew old gracefully and mellowed pleasantly from spot to spot, like the priceless damasks of the eighteenth century. "I know," Claudia agreed, "I guess it's the first dozen spots that are the hardest."

At any rate, it was a full-time job to learn to keep house properly and for months she didn't think about anything else. The war in China, and what Hitler was doing in Europe seemed vague and unreal to her. She made every effort to appear interested and even indignant, and to get upset over Roosevelt, too, but for all her painstaking application to the world's pandemonium, she could not completely down the conviction that the crystallised essence of life and reality lay in the loving of two people, and the building of a home.

She had even given up the idea of being a great actress, for it didn't seem important next to being married to David. She had gone to dramatic school for two seasons, which had meant quite a battle with her mother, who hadn't approved of the idea, and who would have probably liked her only child to be bright. But Claudia had the sort of brain that couldn't cope with anything the least bit educational, so after an enjoyable but wholly unprofitable year at college Mrs. Brown finally gave her consent to a career which she devoutly hoped would end in settlement work.

It ended, however, in meeting David and falling head over heels in love with him, which was something that Mrs. Brown hadn't bargained for, as Claudia was only a child and absolutely ignorant of the facts of life. Claudia, of course, thought she knew a great deal, but it boiled down to just a few odds and ends she'd picked up here and there—and later she found that she hadn't the sense to put two and two together. Mrs. Brown, however, suspected this to be so, and was at a loss to try to explain her daughter's extreme state of purity to a comparative stranger, but David seemed to grasp the entire situation and begged her not to worry. He was so understanding that Mrs. Brown couldn't get over what an old head he had, even though he was only twenty-five. It was almost a foregone conclusion, at that point, that she was going to give her consent—which, eventually, she did. She'd wept a little at the wedding, anyway, because her husband wasn't alive to see his daughter led to the altar. Claudia felt that she also should

be saddened at the thought, but her father had died of a scratch on the finger before she was born, so it was difficult to get emotional about it at this late date, especially when she was so happy.

As the months passed, they grew happier and happier, and never once had a single quarrel. David surpassed Claudia's wildest expectations, for, in spite of his old head, he was a perfect fool in a number of things—such as always having had a secret longing for a baby elephant, and embarrassing the life out of her by sitting opposite to her in the bus and making faces, or walking along with her on a sunny day with his umbrella up. Once she'd tried to run away from him, but he'd dashed after her bowlegged, and people had turned and stared, and Claudia had felt like sinking through the ground with mortification. Some day, she planned with relish, she'd turn him over to a policeman. "Officer," she would say, "this man is annoying me, he's not responsible." The more David would protest that he was her husband, the worse it would look, and Claudia would let him go to jail for an hour and see how he liked it.

On the sixth-month anniversary of their marriage, David's older brother, Hartley, who was very rich and married to Julia Trowbridge, of the Back Bay Trowbridges, offered them their box at the opera, because they were going to the opening of the horse show instead. "You have to dress," Julia had reminded Claudia crisply over the telephone.

"Yes, I know, thanks very much," Claudia had answered jivily enough, but inwardly she was griped. Didn't Julia think that she, Claudia, knew enough to dress for the opera?

"It's 'Tristan,'" Julia went on, with the chummy manner of the chronic opera goer. Claudia, for example, would have said "Tristan and Isolde," but then Claudia was bored with any opera after the first act, while Julia listened intently from start to finish, no matter how many times she'd heard it. She was considered extremely musical and had a box for everything. She had the reputation for being a great beauty, too, but Claudia couldn't see it. Style, yes, but thin and flat as a matchstick.

She and Hartley had no children, in spite of the fact that they had been married five years, and David said that, judging by Julia's flanks she didn't want any. He wasn't overly devoted to Julia and he thought that his brother, Hartley, was putting on weight—which was another way of saying that Hartley didn't meet with his complete respect either.

The whole thing in a nutshell was that the Hartley Naughtons treated the David Naughtons just a little bit like poor relations and Claudia resented it. She knew that Julia thought David had thrown himself away on a little nobody from Virginia, when he

could have married any one of a half dozen Junior Leaguers. Junior Leaguers, as far as Claudia could make out from the pictures in the social columns, usually had no chins. Julia didn't have such a good one herself. She had to dress just so around the neck in order to bring it up to par.

The more Claudia thought of the opera, the less she felt like going, but David, who played Wagner on the victrola every Sunday morning, had probably been looking forward to it, for he came home early with an orchid laid like a jewel in a square white box.

"Oh," she breathed, parting the mists of waxed paper and lifting the flower to her nose.

"Orchids don't smell," David informed her. "They're just for show."

"It was darling of you."

He eyed her. "You don't like it?"

"It's beautiful," she protested. "But if you want me to be absolutely above board, orchids are my least favourite flower, except begonias."

"My God!" said David.

She was instantly contrite. "I shouldn't have said so, I've hurt your feelings."

"Hurt my feelings—" He swooped her in his arms and spun her around until the room poured dizzily about her head and against her ears. "Darling, you're marvellous!" he exulted. "I'm the luckiest man in the world, you're a woman in a million!"

They ate supper in the kitchen, with no butter plates, to economise on time. Julia had warned them to be early or they'd have to take the back seats in the box.

"I put your tails out," Claudia remarked.

"Thanks," said David.

"You're going to smell like a moth's funeral. Have some more cauliflower?"

"Couldn't."

"Didn't you like it?"

"I liked it fine."

"I made up the recipe."

"Pretty rich."

She gave a sly, closed smile. It should have been rich, an egg and half a cup of cream in the sauce, and then baked with cheese and loads of butter on top. Claudia's mother, who had an eagle eye when it came to people's health, had mentioned some time ago that David looked as if he had lost a little flesh, and David had admitted with pride that he had peeled off several pounds.

"That's not so smart," said Mrs. Brown.

Claudia didn't think it was so smart either, and made up her mind that he was going to gain them back double-quick. She lost no time in setting to work and there wasn't a single thing she'd cooked in the past month that didn't have at least twice the ordinary amount of nourishment in it.

Now David, unsuspecting, pushed the cauliflower out of the way, took his pipe out his pocket and looked at it longingly. It hardly paid to smoke it. He took a cigarette. "Damn Julia," he said.

Claudia sighed deeply. "Just our luck. There's a new Mickey Mouse playing on the corner."

"With or without Bank-Nite?"

"Without."

"Let's go."

She gaped. "But the opera——"

"Which would you rather—Tristan or Mickey?"

She regarded him with mingled awe and worship. "Would you have the nerve?" she whispered.

"Would I have the nerve? Say, whose anniversary is this, anyway?"

Claudia thought she would die of happiness. "Let's not let the tickets go to waste, though," she suggested. "Let's give them to the superintendent and then maybe he'll fix the faucets."

David thought that was a good idea, although it occurred to him to wonder what the rest of the box would think. Fritz always smelled as if he had just eaten lunch, and Bertha, his wife, was huge and made noises when she breathed. "Everybody'll think they're important musicians," Claudia said.

"Or foreign royalty," added David. So they stopped off at the superintendent's flat on the way out, and both Fritz and Bertha were much stirred at the invitation. It appeared that they were real music lovers and went to all the park corners in the summer.

"I'm glad we're not German," said Claudia as they walked down the street. "Who would you rather be if you weren't us?"

"Nobody," said David firmly.

It was a good movie from start to finish, with no short subjects on travel or education. "Aren't you glad we came?" Claudia asked, squeezing his arm.

David squeezed back.

On the way home David stopped in at a drugstore.

"What do you want?" asked Claudia.

"Oh, nothing," he returned airily, and then promptly walked off and went into a huddle at the prescription counter.

Claudia thought she'd better walk around and keep herself busy. She couldn't think of anything to buy, so she drifted to the soda fountain and climbed up on a scat.

"What's the difference between the extra-size and the regular?" she asked the clerk.

The clerk said that the extra-size gave you two blobs of ice cream and chopped nuts and a maraschino cherry on top, and cost a quarter. Somehow the cherry appealed to her.

"I'm having an extra-sized one," she told David as he joined her. David looked embarrassed; he apparently didn't think it was manly to drink a soda.

"Keep me company with something," she urged, and, to be obliging, although he still felt uncomfortably full of cauliflower, he ordered a lemon and lime.

"I think," said Claudia dreamily, as they emerged into the street, "that the first thing tomorrow morning I shall buy myself a whole bottle full of maraschino cherries."

While they undressed for bed, David put on a record from "Tristan and Isolde," which cleared both of their consciences very adequately.

"If we're so happy on half an anniversary," Claudia murmured as she went to sleep, "think what we'll be on a whole one—"

When they awoke they were still in each other's arms, and it was morning.

"How can it be," she marvelled, "that I love you more than ever?"

It was then that David explained the difference between real love and the other. He was so interesting that she hated to pull herself away, but she'd planned a special breakfast for him and she had to get started on it.

"Finish about it tonight," she begged.

"What's your hurry?"

She looked secretive and important. "Wait and see."

By the time he walked out into the kitchen there were four handsome little jelly pancakes keeping warm for him on top of the stove.

"Are those for me?"

"For who else?" she replied jauntily. "Aren't they stunning?"

"Very stunning," he assured her firmly. "But not for breakfast. I never take anything else but coffee and toast for breakfast."

"Which isn't smart. Coffee and toast is nothing to do a full

day's work on." She brought the pancakes to the table with her lips prim and set. "It's just an idea, this coffee and toast business."

A strange cold shiver went down David's spine. To his startled eyes she faded slowly into the image of her mother. David liked Claudia's mother—he liked the unexpected dash of humour, the core of robust contempt which resided within her gentle being—but he had long since sized her up as a congenital food-pusher and window watcher. She never lost a chance to worry about anyone. A poor appetite filled her with misgiving and a delayed homecoming roused in her the direst pictures of catastrophe.

"How do you expect to keep well if you let your weight go down?"

David brought his thoughts back to Claudia. Despair rose up within him. "My weight's all right!" he roared at her.

It was the first time he had ever roared at her. He couldn't bear the pain and bewilderment in her eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. He picked up his fork. It was already late, so he had to bolt the pancakes. When he kissed her good-bye he was distressingly aware of a heavy lump lodging somewhere between his neck and his waistline.

"David," she whispered, searching his face, "is there anything wrong?"

"Don't be silly. I'm stuffed, that's all."

"But are you angry with me?"

He kissed her again. "I'm late, darling; I have to hurry."

"David." She clung to him. "There is something wrong. We were so happy last night and all of a sudden you're like a stranger."

He wanted to tell her that he was probably the most intimate stranger she'd ever met, but a sneeze cut him off. He plunged for his handkerchief and sneezed again.

"You've caught a cold," cried Claudia, and in the dimness of the hall it was as if his mother-in-law were clinging to him. "I'll get your overcoat——"

"I don't need an overcoat!"

"You do. There's a nasty wind blowing, I've been chilly all morning."

His control vanished. "This is too much!" he expostulated. "You're chilly and I have to put a coat on." He put her from him with finality. "Good-bye, Claudia. I'll see you tonight."

He left her standing there, her eyes wide and her lips parted. It was several moments after the door closed behind him that she realised that they had had their first quarrel and she didn't

even know what it was about. She felt bruised and disillusioned. Perhaps, she thought, miserably, it was the other kind of love after all. Or perhaps—to use her mother's expression—he had something working in him; there was a lot of influenza around.

When he came home that evening with a mammoth bottle of maraschino cherries, their quarrel vanished into something that had never been and Claudia knew, with a sinking heart, that his irritability had sprung from the definite beginnings of a cold. He wouldn't admit it, of course. He coughed quite a lot and blamed it, apologetically, on his pipe. But Claudia was convinced that the trouble was in his chest and she lay awake all night worrying about pneumonia. Every once in a while she would touch him lightly to see if he had a fever—but no matter how lightly she did it, he jumped. In fact the lighter she did it the more he jumped, and finally he burst out and said for the love of heaven to stop tickling him. "I'm not tickling you," she explained. "I just love you."

This roused him fully and she had to make clear, rather quickly, that she only meant she was worried about him. "Well, stop worrying about me and go to sleep," he muttered and turned away from her.

He looked actually ill the next morning. She implored him not to go to the office, but he pooh-poohed the idea. He wouldn't wear rubbers either (although it was rainy), and became huffy at the mere suggestion, as if he were too good to wear them or something.

She spent a wretched day and so did he. He hadn't had a cold in years and rebelliously he traced the origin of this one to an overworked digestive tract. He'd never be able to make Claudia see that, though. Nor would he be able to make her understand, without mortally wounding her, that their marriage at this point trembled perilously on the brink of real disaster.

By noon he would have been glad to crawl home into bed, but the thought of Claudia held him back, so he applied himself to a set of blueprints against a mounting fever and a splitting headache. He gave it up finally as a bad job. "I'm ducking out," he told his secretary.

The rain had cleared and there was a touch of winter in the air. It felt good to him. He started to hail an uptown bus, and then changed his mind and began to walk. He didn't dare put his key in the door at three o'clock, or Claudia would get panicky and send for the doctor, and between the two of them he'd end up on his back. He set his jaw. He couldn't afford to

be laid up, he had to go to Connecticut tomorrow for a conference on the new Hall of Records.

A bleak wind cut into him, making him raw and tender. His bones ached and his eyes burned, but he kept on walking doggedly. He couldn't help feeling sorry for himself. When a man was afraid to go home, it didn't make any difference whether his wife aimed a brick at him, or killed him with devotion—the result was the same.

He paused for a traffic light and noticed a small crowd of people gathered before a pet shop on the corner. Pet shops held an irresistible fascination to both Claudia and himself and they had decided that some day, when they were rolling in wealth and could live in a huge house, they would own six of the largest dogs in the world. From force of habit he drifted over towards the window. It was an attractive display—a cage of snakes, a pair of monkeys, and a litter of tiny orange-coloured Persian kittens. A girl standing next to David said to the shabby young man who was with her, "Drag me away or I'll smash the glass and steal them!"

The young man laughed as if he were very much in love and thought everything she said was wonderful. "Then I'd better hurry up and take you home," he told her huskily, and they moved on down the block.

David preferred the snakes, but he looked at the kittens, because the girl reminded him of Claudia, a little. He didn't particularly like cats, but he had to admit they were cute—round and furry and impudent and inquisitive, with limpid amber-coloured eyes and infinitesimal pointed ears. Before he knew what he was doing he walked into the store.

The shopkeeper, who economised in words, shook his head. "Not for sale yet," he said.

David's cold made him arbitrary and belligerent. "Why not?" he demanded.

"Too young. Come back in a week."

"Coming back in a week won't help me now," said David. "I'd like one of those kittens right away."

"Mister, they don't eat yet. It's a lot of work raising a kitten off a bottle."

"Listen," said David hoarsely, "you don't understand. I want it for my wife. I want it to be a lot of work. I want to take her mind off things."

A look of compassion came into the shopkeeper's face. Tactfully he refrained from asking painful questions. He moved to the window. "Which one?"

They all looked alike to David. "Pick out a nice male," he said. "Pick out two," he added largely, on the theory that two would be twice as much trouble as one.

Claudia was waiting for him at the door. "Oh, darling," she greeted him in a mingled agitation and relief, "I've been worried to death about you. I telephoned the office ages ago and the secretary said you'd already left, feeling positively miserable."

David took a deep breath. He didn't have to look at Claudia to see that she had a hot-water bottle in one eye and a thermometer in the other. His grasp tightened on the hole-punched box in his hand. He thought, "If this doesn't work now, I'm a goner."

He lifted the lid. The kittens, as if following a cue in a play, gave out a faint but poignant meow. Claudia was at his side in an instant. "Oh, David," she breathed. She reached for them and cuddled them against her cheek.

"Do you like them?" he asked needlessly.

"Do I like them!"

"They have to be fed with a bottle."

"But I haven't got a bottle," she exclaimed tragically.

"A spoon will do," he hastily amended. "Anyway, they have to have some warm milk right away, they're hungry."

Ecstasy shone in her eyes. "Oh, the poor darlings!" she cried. "The sweet, adorable little angels."

The sweet, adorable little angels missed their mother, and all night long they told the world about it. David dozed fitfully through their shrill complaints. It didn't improve his disposition, but it was better than having Claudia wake him up to ask him how he felt. He was aware of her lying rigid beside him, but she didn't say a word, grateful for his apparent oblivion to the mounting indignation that issued from the bathroom.

Towards dawn he heard her rise stealthily and move the kittens into the kitchen. They were quiet for a little while and then they began again. Claudia gave a stifled sigh and rose once more. David waited. Silence. Dead silence. He wondered drowsily how she had shut them up and why she didn't come back.

When he opened his eyes it was morning. Claudia was gone, her bed denuded of sheets and blankets. He threw on his robe and fished for his slippers, and went in search of her. He found her sound asleep on the living-room sofa. The kittens were sound asleep, too, cradled in the soft warm bend of her arm. David grinned. His throat ached and his head throbbed, but he felt like a million dollars. He backed into the hall and cautiously closed

the door. With luck he could be shaved and out of the house before she awakened.

The kittens continued to take up the slack of her energies and David, congratulating himself complacently, recovered from the influenza without missing a single day at his office. He called them the little red herrings, but fortunately Claudia couldn't see the point and said, for goodness sake, why, when they didn't look like fish at all?

Unfortunately, the smaller of the little herrings couldn't take it, and just a week after its arrival quietly passed away. Claudia was heartbroken. David told her it was distemper, but privately he diagnosed an overdose of love. He was glad that he had bought a spare, so to speak, and that it seemed a strong and healthy specimen.

Claudia named him Shakespeare and devoted herself intensely to his welfare. She brushed him twice a day and gave him cod liver oil for his coat, and calcium for his bones. She took to reading books on cats and decided that some day she was going to breed cats, and run a Kattery. This worried David not a little. Women had been known to do things like that before—cat shows were full of them—and although he didn't know any of them personally, he was certain that they all had funny hair and generally disturbed sex lives.

Bringing up Shakespeare, however, didn't prove all beer and skittles. As he grew older he rebelled against the cod liver oil and the groomings, and Claudia's hands were full of deep scratches, which roused in Claudia's mother the most ominous prophecies of blood poisoning. She thought that Claudia looked rather peaked and that it was dangerous to the health to keep on breathing the same air with a cat.

As a matter of fact Claudia hadn't been feeling very fit of late. She didn't say anything about it to David, but she spent some part of each day on the sofa, feeling dizzy. One afternoon she felt particularly wretched, but she tried to forget herself by bathing Shakespeare. She didn't want him to catch cold, so she dried him with the vacuum cleaner, and after that she decided to make a complete job of it and cut his claws. It was quite an ordeal for both of them. Claudia was exhausted before she got round to the back paws and had to lie down by the open window for a few minutes, while Shakespeare, looking glum, sought instant refuge behind the sofa.

In a little while she felt better. "Come along, Shakespeare," she called pleasantly and picked up the scissors once more.

Shakespeare crouched, his amber-coloured eyes inimical and watchful, his tail brandishing slowly like a danger signal. At her approach he was as if he had never been. She dropped on her hands and knees and peered beneath the sofa. She saw little fluffs of dust beneath the low-set springs and thought wearily, "Oh dear, I'll have to sweep under there tomorrow." She strained for the tip of a retreating paw but it dissolved into nothingness at her touch, and by the time she had scrambled to her feet Shakespeare was fencing for time behind the big chair.

"Shakespeare!" she commanded sternly.

She darted towards him, but he sprang to the table. She made a dash for him. He leapt for the window-sill, where he stood for a split second, inscrutable and deliberate. Then, with disarming simplicity, he moved gently towards the edge of the sill, gazed downwards into space—and jumped.

Claudia screamed. The shock and horror of it turned her legs to water. Sick with foreboding, she forced herself to look below into the courtyard.

She didn't see what she'd expected to see. Shakespeare wasn't lying in a heap of crushed and huddled bones. Shakespeare was making a lively getaway towards the street, his ears laid back and his tail a horizontal banner of escape. His intentions were obvious and entirely reprehensible. Claudia recognised at once that he had no idea of ever coming back. Anger and sorrow overwhelmed her. He might get lost or run over. She headed for the stairs. But all at once the old dizziness assailed her. The world began to spin and her heart beat in her ears like great waters rushing over her.

Fritz found her a little later when he came upstairs to return Shakespeare, whom he had met skirting the corner grocery store. Because he remembered, and would continue to remember, the opera tickets with an everlasting gratitude, he reached forth a horny hand and caught the renegade around the middle. "You come with me," he ordained. "Where're you going, anyhow?"

He was frightened when he saw Claudia unconscious in the hall and ran downstairs for Bertha. Bertha, however, thought nothing of it. "Ach, is natural," she assured him comfortably. "Don't you remember, I always fainted sometimes, also?"

They carried Claudia to the sofa. In a little while she opened her eyes. "Where am I," she asked, exactly as if she were on the stage.

They told her where she was and what had happened. She was both amazed and pleased. She had always envied people who fainted. "I never did it in my life before," she marvelled.

"What on earth do you think got into me?"

Bertha gave a broad wink. "I'm no doctor," she said. "But I bet you twenty cents."

David came home not long afterwards. He smelled onions, but as he happened to like onions he sniffed deeply and appreciatively. It made him feel hungry for the first time in weeks. Shakespeare meandered out to meet him and rubbed against his legs, purring like a hypocrite. David, who didn't know what had been going on, bent to pat him. "Where's the boss, Shakespeare?"

Shakespeare kept a haughty silence. David walked into the kitchen. He was surprised to see Bertha, bustling over the stove like she belonged there. "The cat jumped out of the window and Mrs. Naughton didn't feel good, so I thought I better stay and fix supper," she explained.

David went a little pale and his heart gave a lurch of fear. He realised suddenly how it felt to be worried about someone that you loved. "Where is she?" he quickly asked.

"Here," called Claudia from the doorway. She still felt a little shaky, but she didn't want him to be alarmed about her.

He caught her to him. "Darling!" he cried. "What's wrong?"

But he knew, even before she answered, that nothing could be really wrong. She looked far too happy, and her eyes were shining just like stars.

"I'll bet you twenty cents," she whispered.

CHAPTER TWO

SECRET ALLIANCE

CLAUDIA had never bothered very much about God until she started in having the baby. Then she began to feel that He had taken a very special interest in her and tardily acknowledged to His infinite kindness all the other good things in her life, including David. Looking back upon it, there was no doubt that God had had a very decided hand in David, and that He had worked in strangely devious ways His miracles to perform.

In the first place, she would never have met David if she hadn't left college to go to dramatic school. Nor would he have known she existed if it hadn't been for her mother's worrisome disposition. It seemed strange to find suddenly that her entire happiness could be attributed to something that she had always regarded as a blight upon her life, so to speak, for even as a child she had rebelled against the anxiety that constantly hovered over her. If she had so much as sniffed, she'd have to have her throat looked down, or her temperature taken. She wasn't allowed to skate in the gutter or ride her bicycle to school and, indignity of indignities, she had to wear winter underwear with long woollen tights that filled her legs full of tell-tale bumps. But mother said never mind looks, she was warm and that was the main thing. It wasn't the main thing at all, only Mrs. Brown couldn't understand that. "When I'm grown up," Claudia had once warned her passionately, "I'm going to wear practically nothing!"

"When you're grown up you can do as you like," Mrs. Brown had peaceably returned.

She must have thought that Claudia's growing up belonged to so remote a future that there was no need to take it seriously. But it happened before either of them knew it, and one day Claudia woke up to the fact that although she was eighteen, she was still being treated as if she were eight. Moreover, there was nothing to be done about it, for she realised with a kind of helpless des-

pair that she could never bring herself to hurt her mother by asserting her rightful independence. "I'll be home late," she'd say firmly before going out to a party. "Terribly late, so don't worry."

"All right," Mrs. Brown would gallantly reply; but Claudia knew perfectly well that with the stroke of midnight her mother's thoughts would run to automobile wrecks, or something equally cheerful.

Claudia often thought how nice it would be to stay on at a party for breakfast, but she never did.

"You spoil your mother," Helen Drew told her. "When you keep giving in to her you're just asking for trouble."

Although Helen was her closest friend, Claudia hadn't seen Helen's mother more than half a dozen times during their long years of intimacy. Mrs. Drew lived a life of her own. She'd divorced Helen's father and then gone in for politics, which left Helen free as air. Indeed, Helen was already contemplating a trial marriage with a senior at Yale.

"You've just had a lucky break," Claudia summed up despondently. "It's too late to begin training my mother now. I should have begun as a child."

She had all but resigned herself to the fate of a spinster when she met David at a gala performance of "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." He was the most bored man she had ever seen. He was bored with Mrs. Tanqueray and bored with the dance that followed. But he'd helped build the new auditorium and he had to be on hand to see that everything worked properly. All the girls thought he was the most fascinating man in the room and that he looked more like an athlete than an architect, but nobody could make him talk. He just stood in a corner by himself and glowered. At the precise stroke of twelve he marched up to Miss Rossman, the head of the school, and said good night in a way that indicated that he had done his duty and was finished. At the same moment Claudia drifted over to Miss Rossman's side and murmured that she would have to be going home.

"So early, dear child? Not alone I trust?" (Though Miss Rossman was forty-five and wore glasses, she didn't believe that women should go about unescorted after dark.)

"I'll be all right, I'll just hop in a taxi," said Claudia, who always liked to slip away without attracting attention.

"I'm sure," said Miss Rossman, taking quite a lot for granted, "that Mr. Naughton wouldn't mind seeing you to your door," and before he could answer she'd fluttered away to attend to the refreshments.

It was apparent that Mr. Naughton was anything but pleased at the prospect. "Where do you live?" he asked curtly.

Claudia couldn't resist. "Brooklyn," she said.

Mr. Naughton's blue eyes grew even more forbidding than they had been all evening and, ever so slightly, his nostrils quivered and flared. Claudia studied him with the interest of the actress and thought what a perfect registering of polite outrage. "I like the way you do that," she remarked.

"Do what?"

"With your nose."

He frowned. "What part of Brooklyn?"

She laughed. "I wanted to frighten you. I only live a few blocks away. I can go by myself, really."

"I'll take you," he said grudgingly.

"No, but really, it isn't necessary," she protested.

He put his hand on her arm. "Come along, don't argue." She felt herself shoved along as if he were her brother or something, and she decided he had a nerve to treat her like that.

She hung back. "I'll go by myself," she informed him stiffly.

"You'll do as you're told," he replied. "Hurry up, I want to get out of here."

"Oh, you've got a nasty disposition!" she cried.

His lips twitched. "You're not any too sweet yourself."

"Well, I should hope not," she said. "I don't trust sweet people."

"Same here."

Spontaneously they smiled at each other and she noticed what lovely teeth he had. She always noticed teeth and hands and backs of necks. She waited until he turned. The back of his neck was perfect and his hands were just the sort she liked—strong and clean and beautifully shaped.

In the taxicab the unwonted glibness of her opening encounter with him slipped from her like a garment that did not really belong to her, and she shrank into a corner, feeling ecstatically miserable and tongue-tied.

"Aren't you well?" he inquired civilly. "Is that why you left early?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I always leave early."

His interest quickened. "Don't you like parties?"

"It isn't that, but——"

"But what?"

Before she knew it she was telling him the way she felt about not worrying her mother; and ~~now~~ ~~she~~ she could have kicked herself, for he would probably think she was all kinds of a fool. But

he didn't seem to. He just listened quietly and then he said after a moment or so, "I never knew my mother. She died when I was born."

"Oh dear," said Claudia. "That's sad. Who brought you up?"

"Nurses, tutors, a father who didn't know very much about children. I wish we could have been closer. Like you and your mother. He died last month."

"I'm so sorry!" cried Claudia. She meant it from away down deep.

He glanced up at her, surprised. He said abruptly, "I take back about not liking sweet people——"

"What do you mean?" she stammered, with her heart stamping up and down all over her body.

"I've discovered that you're a very sweet person," he told her with absolute seriousness. "At first I thought you were just another little smart-aleck flirt like all the rest of them——"

"I wish I were," she confessed. "I'd like to be, but I don't know how."

"I always wanted to meet a girl that didn't know how," he said, "but I didn't suppose there were any of them left in the world."

There was something in his voice that made her choke up all at once. She couldn't speak, she just sat there, drowned in happiness. He didn't speak either. They didn't say another word to each other until they reached her door, and he put out his hand and said "Good night."

"Good night," she said.

Her mother pretended that she just woke up. "How was the party?" she called out of the dark, as Claudia tiptoed past her door.

"Fine," said Claudia. "I met the only man I'd ever like to marry."

"That's nice," said Mrs. Brown. "What's his name—how old is he?"

"Naughton. I don't know his first name. Pretty old; twenty-five at least."

Mrs. Brown settled down to go to sleep. "Don't run around barefoot, a glass broke in the bathroom," she adjured. "Be sure to invite me to the wedding," she added as an afterthought.

It was the shock of her life when, scarcely a month later, Claudia and David actually did announce their wedding plans. "It's unheard of," she cried in a shaking voice. "Claudia's nothing but a child!"

"I realise that," said David grimly. "Believe me, Mrs. Brown, it's the last thing on earth I wanted to do—to fall in love with her. But there's no use fighting against it. She's all the woman I'll ever need or want."

"But it's impossible for you to decide a thing like that. Why you've only just met, you hardly know each other."

"We know each other," said Claudia. "We've always known each other."

Mrs. Brown wrung her hands. "Be sensible," she implored.

"I know the way you feel," said David gently. "But trust me with her please——"

Mrs. Brown tried not to cry. "She's only a child," she kept repeating.

Afterwards Claudia began to have a faint suspicion of how her mother must have felt and to understand the fear that lay behind her words. For there were certainly a lot of ins and outs to marriage that nobody could ever tell you about, no matter how hard they tried, and a honeymoon was not a bed of roses, as was commonly supposed. It made her blood run cold to think of having one with anyone else but David, who was darling as could be and behaved practically like her father. When she told him he didn't seem very pleased at the comparison, but he got the general gist of what she meant, and laid his lips against her hair and said that his only desire was to take care of her and protect her and bring her joy. The way he said it was like a prayer, and in answer she put her arms around him and said that all she wanted in the world was to be his wife and to make him happy.

"I guess this is being really married," whispered David.

"I guess it is," she whispered back.

But it merely showed that they didn't know what they were talking about. "I love you a thousand times more than ever," Claudia said when she found out about the baby.

"I couldn't love you more," said David, looking at her as if he had never really seen her before, "but I love you differently."

"Differently better, or differently worse?" she asked, insatiable.

He held her so close that she could scarcely breathe. "Differently all ways," he muttered. "I don't want anything ever to take us away from each other——"

"You're not jealous of the baby?"

"Of course not." He made himself smile, but she could see that something bothered him. She knew suddenly what it was—it was something or other that the doctor had said about her

health. "Oh, don't be silly," she said, "I'll feel fine in a few weeks; it's just at the beginning."

"You'll be all right," he agreed.

Nevertheless, she could tell that he didn't like the thought of her starting out alone on the long, uncertain journey into motherhood. He would have gladly had the baby for her, and so would her mother. She wished that she could convince them that there was no need to worry about her—that, literally speaking, she was in the best of care. But her mother would conclude that she was getting ready to go to heaven and David would think she had got religion like the coloured cleaning woman who talked to herself out loud. He had an idea that most people who were violently religious were either a little off or had guilty consciences or sex troubles, so she knew that she had to be careful about breaking the news of her own sudden affiliation with God. It would be rather a shock to him, as she'd never in her life shown the slightest tendency toward religion. She'd never even gone to Sunday School and she didn't have much patience with church. She still felt that way—more than ever—because she now knew for a fact that God didn't hold office hours on special days but that He was on the job all the time, like a twenty-four hour telephone service. It was actually as simple as that, but she'd never caught on to the idea until she found out about the baby. Then all of a sudden she realised how He'd engineered everything from start to finish.

The mere fact that she had been married only a few short months was proof in itself. There was Julia, for example, married for years without a sign of a family—and Claudia getting pregnant right off the bat. The funny part of it was that Julia thought it was an accident and said in her deepish voice—Claudia liked her voice best of anything about her—"You're awfully sporting about it, Claudia. Count on us for the handsomest perambulator you can buy."

Claudia was delighted over the perambulator, but she was annoyed by the implication that the baby was sheer carelessness. In the first place she hadn't been careless, she'd just been sleepy, and anyway the baby was meant to be; there was no doubt about it. It was like a flower, blossoming out of the love between David and herself. The idea sounded a little poetical, but David understood what she was driving at and said that that was the perfect way to feel about having children, only in these days hardly anyone did.

"But you do, don't you?" she asked quickly.

"Yes and no," David evaded. "I'd have liked to have waited

a couple of years. Under the circumstances, I hate to have to draw any more salary."

"I know. You mean because you're a partner now? But you won't have to. We'll manage. A baby doesn't amount to much. Once he's here he probably won't be a great deal more expense than Shakespeare."

David forbore to argue the contention. True, Shakespeare had been a costly investment—having grown (after his alteration to fit the apartment) to three times the size and three times the destructive capacity of any ordinary cat. But David knew that he was a drop in the bucket compared to the potentialities of even the tiniest baby. Not that it mattered. "It isn't so much the money," he told her. "It's you. You should have had a lot more fun before settling down to a family. Look at Helen and the rest of your friends. Still running round to parties and having a good time."

"Nonsense," said Claudia. "I'd rather get a head start in life. With a little push I can be a grandmother at thirty-six."

"That's great," said David, looking harassed.

The months flew past. "I'm glad I don't look like the women I see in Doctor Rowland's office," she told David.

"Why? How do they look?"

"You'd know a mile off——"

"Oh," said David.

Claudia eyed him suspiciously. "You couldn't tell with me, could you?"

"Tell what?"

"Anything," she replied largely. "I was only a hundred and thirteen with my beads on last time. I bet I could fool anyone right up to the last minute."

"I wouldn't be surprised," conceded David leniently.

She was a little taken aback when the Italian vegetable man at the corner remarked, a few weeks later, as he was counting out a dozen oranges for her. "I gotta sweeta little baby home myself." His brown leathery hands explored the golden mound until he found the most beautiful piece of fruit in the whole pile. He picked it up and dropped it into the bag.

Claudia's honesty compelled her. "That's one too many," she demurred.

"Present for your baby," he said, with his dark face opening suddenly in a flashing smile. "Gooda luck."

"Oh, thank you," murmured Claudia.

She wondered who in the world could have told him. On the way home she studied her reflection in the glass window of the

shoemaker's. As far as she could judge, she looked the same as always.

As she entered the seventh month, preparations for the baby began in earnest. Up to this time her mother had been full of old wives' tales of this and that. "Wait until you feel life." "Take your time about moving into a bigger place."

Now there was no postponing of major adjustments any longer, David sat down with a paper and pencil.

"We'll need a maid's room and a room for the baby, which will mean about six hundred more a year for rent. and at least that much for help," he reckoned out, trying not to look gloomy about it.

"I'm afraid so," admitted Claudia. "Can we swing it?"

"Sure," he said in that cocksure manner of his that didn't fool her for an instant.

"There must be some way of cutting down," she thought. And then it was that God stepped in and began to manage things for them. He even saw to it they didn't have to go to the expense of a moving van, for, on the top floor of the same building in which they were living there was a large apartment of four rooms and bath. It was the only one of its kind in the whole house, and a nice lawyer and his wife had been occupying it for the past eight years. Suddenly, out of a clear sky, the poor lawyer discovered that he had heart trouble and would have to go to California to live, whereupon Fritz, the superintendent, rushed to Claudia and said if they took the lease over they could have it at the continued rental of only a hundred and eight dollars and thirty-three cents a month.

"Oh," cried Claudia, "how wonderful!" But she couldn't help feeling that perhaps it wasn't right for God to have shown such favouritism at the expense of someone else. "It's darling of you, God, thanks loads," she acknowledged inwardly, "but I feel awfully sorry for the Coopers."

The Coopers, however, considered themselves very lucky to have had the lease taken off their hands so quickly, and Mrs. Cooper, who had a soft quavery voice and a good many books on Christian Science around, told Claudia that everything was working out wonderfully for them. "I'm sure," she said with a sad but cheerful smile, "that this has all happened for the best." Claudia was awed. "Listen, God," she sent up inwardly, "you're simply marvellous, the way You juggle things."

She hoped that He didn't think that she was toadying for further favours, for He kept right on settling their problems in a most amazing fashion. When Bertha, the superintendent's wife,

heard that they were not going to move away after all, she was delighted and offered to come up every day to do the laundry and the cleaning, and lend a hand with the baby after its arrival. She had raised six children of her own—three were married and three were dead—but she knew all about babies anyway. "We're lucky," said David, who liked Bertha's cooking.

"Lucky!" Claudia exclaimed. "Why, she's a gift from heaven, and so is the apartment."

She meant it, quite literally. It was just as if she had closed her eyes and whispered, "Heaven send me a beautiful new home and someone to take care of it and do the didies and keep us within our budget. Amen." And when she opened her eyes there was the apartment right in front of her and fat, good-natured Bertha offering her invaluable services at thirty-cents an hour.

"I pay fifty and car fare for a cleaning woman," Mrs. Brown remarked a little wistfully, "and I've yet to find a good one." She thought Bertha had a heart of gold, and bought her a black plush muff with a pocket-book running up the centre of it. Claudia thought it was pretty terrible, sitting out on the middle of Bertha's huge stomach, but Bertha treasured it highly, and in return for it watched Claudia like a hawk, which was just what Mrs. Brown was after.

When the Coopers left for the West, Bertha did all of the hard work of moving, and Fritz carried the furniture upstairs on his strong shoulders. They were settled in less than a week, and the only one who didn't approve of the change was Shakespeare. He kept meowing with homesickness and couldn't seem to get the hang of the nursery, which was very modern. Its sanitation thwarted him at every turn. He clawed the smooth blue linoleum on the floor, thinking it was carpet. He leapt for the gay curtains at the window, only to find that they were made of oiled silk and resisted his hold with a slippery aloofness. Claudia caught him at it. She swooped him in her arms and scolded him roundly. "This room doesn't belong to you, Mister. It belongs to the most beautiful baby in the world, and you stay out of it, especially while you're losing your fur all over the place——"

Shakespeare, dangling limply over her shoulder, looked remote and bored, his amber-coloured eyes fixed haughtily in space. She hugged him against her. "Shakespeare," she whispered, "just think, in another month he'll be here! I'm the happiest person that ever lived!"

It was easier to tell it to Shakespeare than to David. David was glad that she was happy, of course, but he didn't want her to get excited over being happy. He took things much more for granted

than she did and would have been astonished, and a little uneasy, if she so much as hinted that the gracious flowing ease that marked their present existence sprang from some higher source than the ordinary passing of events. Once she tried to explain to him that sense of a great and abiding Friendship, but he regarded her strangely and said with a trace of alarm, "Look here, Claudia, you're not going to spring a pair of wings on me, are you?"

She looked troubled. "Aren't I just as much of a so-and-so as I was before I was pregnant?"

"You'd better be," he admonished her; "the so-and-so in you was the first thing I fell in love with."

She didn't like holier-than-thou people any more than he did, so she resolved that at all costs she mustn't develop symptoms like the coloured cleaning woman or Mrs. Cooper. "Listen, God," she appealed, "don't let me get so religious that it shows. It would disappoint David like nobody's business."

Nevertheless, she felt a little guilty for harbouring a reverence that he did not suspect, and she sometimes thought that if he could only get the idea of being in touch with God their marriage would be a complete and perfect thing. She didn't care whether he used the name God or not. He could say Nature, or Power, or anything he wanted that would make it easier for his pride, for David was the sort of person who took pride in doing everything on his own, without anybody's help. "When he sees how simply and easily the baby's going to come," she thought, "he'll begin to see what I mean."

There was no doubt in her mind that between herself and God there was to be established a new record in childbirth. It wasn't the number—the quintuplets had pretty well taken the edge off anyone's ambition in that direction—but it was the speed and non-chalance with which the performance was to be accomplished.

She had it all planned out. David would leave some fine morning, and by the time he reached the office there'd be a message waiting for him to call his home.

"Hello, David——"

"What's wrong, dear?" (She could hear the note of anxiety in his voice.)

"Nothing"—very casually—"only I thought you'd like to know you had a son."

Her imagination couldn't go much further, but that was the general idea of it, and, in a week or so, she expected to be as good as new.

Just a month before the baby was due Miss Farley, the nurse,

came to call. She presented a long list of necessary articles for home use, and told Claudia what to put in her suit-case to take to the hospital. Claudia had heard that she was Doctor Rowland's most capable obstetrical nurse, yet she seemed like any ordinary girl in a brown suit and a hatty-looking hat. She liked Shakespeare, though, and thought that the nursery was the cutest room ever, so Claudia felt that they'd get along very well together.

"But I won't need you for anywhere near as long as six weeks," she warned her candidly. "I'll be up and around in no time."

"That's nice," said Miss Farley affably. "Have you anyone to shop that list for you."

Claudia laughed. "Goodness, I'm no cripple," she said. "I'll go downtown tomorrow."

However, she didn't feel quite up to shopping the next day. She lay on the sofa, trying to read some new books that Julia had sent her. They were all best sellers, but for the life of her Claudia couldn't see why. She wished, petulantly, that somebody would write a plain story about ordinary people like herself, with as little description as possible, and a lot of everyday conversation. She tossed the books aside and wondered if she were hungry. She wondered if her watch had stopped or whether it could only be three o'clock. For the first time in her pregnancy the hours dragged to a stop, and she felt caged and helpless in an irksome body. The minute David came home he asked her anxiously, if anything was wrong, but she told him she was bored.

She woke the next morning with a small nagging pain in her back. It didn't amount to much and she forgot about it when she saw there was a sale of infants' wear advertised in the newspaper, which, in view of Miss Farley's lengthy list, bore all the earmarks of a divine coincidence.

She left the house early in order to avoid her mother's daily telephone call—Mrs. Brown would undoubtedly put forth a dozen reasons why Claudia should not go shopping alone. "It's a good thing I'm strong-minded," she said to herself as she hailed a taxi.

The cab threaded its way down Second Avenue and then turned west towards Madison. Claudia closed her eyes, although usually she watched the meter from force of habit. The motion of the car, she discovered in dismay made her ill and the funny little pain across her back stabbed her anew with the slightest jolt. She was glad when the cab finally drew to a stop. The taxi driver fumbled for the correct change, and it seemed that he was going to take for ever. Claudia didn't feel like standing up all at once, so she said "Keep it all," and hurried into the store.

The doors had only just opened, but already there was an

army of women advancing towards the sale counters, their faces intent and a little ugly with ignoble strain. They pulled and pushed and Claudia abruptly lost all desire to join them. The heat and the crowds caused a sudden dizziness, and she hastily sought a chair, and sank with relief into its impersonal leather embrace. She was aware of a dull, heavy pounding which she realised, after a moment's confusion, must be her heart beating savagely against her ribs. She wondered why it was going so fast, and so hard and why, suddenly, she felt so cold when the air was really stifling.

A saleslady passing by drew to a stop. "Don't you feel well, madam?" she inquired solicitously.

"No I don't," acknowledged Claudia faintly.

The saleslady wanted to call a floor walker, but Claudia said, "Oh, no, it wasn't anything like that, the baby wasn't due for another month. I imagine it's just grippe or something," she explained apologetically.

"Mercy, that's a shame," said the saleslady. "You ought to go right home, madam."

"I think I will," said Claudia.

It was Bertha's day for the kitchen closets. Claudia rang the bell instead of using her latchkey. Her hands were trembling and it was easier just to ring. "Ach!" cried Bertha. "Back already? What's the matter, what's the matter here?"

Claudia tried to speak.

"Ach!" cried Bertha. Her arms folded around Claudia's weary body like a soft, strong pillow. "Come, my child, Bertha will help you to get in bed."

Gratefully, she gave herself to Bertha's care. Bertha was wonderful. In a few minutes she had Claudia tucked up in blankets, with a hot-water bag against her feet. Claudia's teeth were chattering. It was good to be at home, but there was a sharp spike of pain in the mattress and it kept pressing into her. "Take it away," she begged Bertha. "Take it away so I can lie down——"

"Is nothing there, child. Is just a little fever you have."

"Why have I got fever?" Claudia whimpered. "It makes me feel so sick. I keep feeling worse and worse——"

"Ach, it passes," Bertha soothed her. "Maybe just a little kidneys' troubles; with little Adolph, I also had it. Is nothing, try to sleep while Bertha goes in the kitchen for a minute."

She heard Bertha in the hall, telephoning. "Bertha! Don't call anyone, I'm all right!"

Bertha appeared at the door, innocent and persuasive. "Sure you are all right," she said. "I was only finishing my closets."

"You lie," protested Claudia feebly.

Bertha pretended to look grieved. "Such a thing to say," she mourned, as she sat beside the bed.

"That's right," said Claudia with a sigh. "Stay with me until God comes back. He probably thinks I'm still at the sale."

"Shhh——" said Bertha quickly.

"Bertha?"

"Yah?"

"You'd better tell Him I feel pretty bad——"

"Yah, I tell Him, go to sleep."

"Bertha——"

Bertha made no reply.

"Bertha——" Claudia called again.

"What is it, darling?"

Claudia lifted her lids with effort. Someone was bending over her. "You're not Bertha," she said.

"It's David, darling——"

"David." Her eyes opened to a haze of pain and confusion, but she saw that he was there like a figure under water. "David, why are you home?"

"To be with you," he said. Then he disappeared beneath the water and he wasn't David any longer. "David, come back!" she cried out.

"It's all right, just lie quietly."

Once more she struggled to open her eyes. Someone in steady white. Not Bertha. Not David. "You remember Miss Farley, don't you?" The voice was cheerful and strong.

"Yes, of course," Claudia said politely. "You haven't a hat on, though."

"Yes I have. A nice little starchy one."

"Why not a brown one?" said Claudia.

"Because I'm taking care of you now," Miss Farley informed her pleasantly.

This was all wrong. It was too bad. "I'm sorry," she said. "You made a mistake. It's too soon—another month—you'd better go away, and come back later."

Miss Farley said nothing. Claudia waited. "Did she go home?" she inquired after a time. No one answered. Claudia opened her eyes. The room was dim. It must be evening.

"Claudia, dear——"

"Is that you. David?"

"Yes, dear."

"Don't keep going away."

"I won't, darling. I'm right here. I want to tell you something, Claudia."

His voice was solemn. She wanted to cheer him up. "Shoot——" she whispered.

"Doctor Rowland thinks the baby ought to come very soon," he said. "Then you'll feel a great deal better—"

She shook her head. "It isn't time. Another month——"

"But it would be better if it happened now."

Claudia's eyes flew open. "When?" she uttered sharply.

"As soon as we get you to the hospital, dear. It's best for you to know what's going on, because you can help us if you know."

The haze cleared from Claudia's brain. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. What had happened to God? Where was He? Surely He must realise that it wasn't good for a baby to come earlier than it was expected. Seventh-month babies—eighth-month babies—she'd heard all about how they sometimes didn't live——

"Oh, no!" she cried to David, "it might hurt him. Don't! Please!"

David took both her hands in his. They were strong and warm, but she felt them tremble. His voice trembled, too. "You're the important one, darling."

Her brain was working now. The fog was gone. She was alert and canny. The room took shape. There were two strange men with a stretcher standing near the bed. A shadow hovered in the doorway. It was her mother. She wanted to scream out that she wasn't going to the hospital to have her baby taken away, but she didn't want to worry her mother. Her mother must be frantic. David was frantic, she could see that now, through his white desperate face. He helped Miss Farley lift her on the stretcher. "Good sport," he whispered.

They moved slowly into the hall, past the nursery, with its sweet linoleumed floor and its small ready crib. "Oh, God! Where are You! How could You!" The pain in her body was as nothing compared to the bereavement in her soul. David was right. There wasn't any God. There was just good luck and bad luck. What a fool she'd been. Crazy, like the coloured cleaning woman. Thinking that God had taken a special interest in her. "And you can tell Mrs. Cooper," she said out loud, in a cold, hard voice, "that she's mistaken, too, and she shouldn't count on anything working out."

"I'll tell her, darling," David said.

"It's delirium," Miss Farley murmured.

Doctor Rowland was standing in the hospital corridor when they wheeled her out of the elevator toward her room. He wore

a white carnation in his buttonhole. "Well, little lady," he greeted her, too cheerfully. He turned to David and said in a low voice, "Does she know?"

"Yes, I know," said Claudia, before David could answer. "There isn't going to be any baby, is there?"

"Oh, come, come," said Doctor Rowland kindly.

David had to leave her at the door. "Fight, darling," he whispered huskily. "For my sake, darling, be an old so-and-so and fight——"

She knew that it was night, because there was a lamp in the corner of the room; and then there was a pale light coming through the window and the sound of rain.

"David."

"I'm here, darling——"

The pain was using all her breath. "Don't let Mammy cry——"

"She's not worrying," he said, robustly.

She saw him through a veil of agony. "You need a shave."

He smiled. She was satisfied. Poor David. She wanted to tell him that she couldn't fight any more. In a little while they were going to put her to sleep, they kept promising it. But by the time they decided to do it, her body would have broken in two. She wanted to call out to God to make them hurry, but she remembered that God wasn't there. "Oh, help me!" she gasped. "Help me, somebody, help me, please!"

"Be a brave girl, just a little longer——"

She had a dream, in which she spoke to God. She couldn't see Him with her eyes, but she saw Him with her being. She screamed her fury at Him. "Why have you done this to me?" she cried. "I hate You! I hate You! I hate You!" God didn't seem angry with her. He was very tender, like David was when she flew into a temper over nothing.

"Don't cry," David said. But she kept on crying—crying—crying—he took both her hands in his and said, "Listen, darling—that's our baby——"

She was lying in the lap of a great quiet pain. David was sitting next to her, holding her hands. The pain was all around her, but it wasn't part of her now. Words came in a whisper, but with ease. "I just dreamed I heard a baby——"

"You didn't dream it," said David. "That was our baby, darling——"

His words came not so easily as hers. She turned her head toward him. There were tears on his cheeks, but his lips were trying to smile and his voice held jubilation. "It's all right, dar-

ling; six pounds and a boy—" He stopped and then he went on, shyly—not as if he were a grown man, but as if he were a child—"There must be a God somewhere, Claudia—" He couldn't go on. Claudia knew how he felt and she knew that he really meant God, because you couldn't talk about Him, you could only feel Him and speak the things to Him that were in your soul.

"Why are you smiling?" David timidly asked.

"Because I'm happy," Claudia said.

A burst of sun came through the window—blinding, beautiful, and warm. "Oh, God," she cried, within her heart, "You're even more marvellous than I thought. Thanks loads!"

CHAPTER THREE

SALT BOX, 1760

WHEN the baby was six months old, David came home one evening from a trip to Connecticut—where he was just putting the finishing touches to the Redbury Hall of Record—with a piece of news that made Claudia so excited she couldn't see straight. "Of course we'll do it," she cried. "It's marvellous, why hesitate?"

"Because," said David, "it's a very important step to take."

She nodded. "Like getting married or having Bobby."

David said that it was even worse, because you could always get a divorce, or put a baby in a foundling home, but you couldn't always get rid of a farm if you had to. "And the grass keeps growing just the same," he grimly mentioned.

"Not if we're there to cut it," said Claudia.

"What if we're not?"

"But we will be."

"Don't be too sure. Are you certain you want to let yourself in for living in the country all year round?"

Claudia solemnly lifted her right hand. "I do, for better or for worse, through weeds and through—what else do you live through on a farm?"

"Mortgages," said David.

She frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think I'd care for a mortgage, David. Why do we have to have one?"

"Because they're using them this year. Now be sensible. We won't rush into this——"

"I adore rushing into things," she interrupted. "I rushed into marrying you and see what happened."

"But at least you knew what I looked like. You goop, you haven't laid eyes on the place yet."

"I'll take your word for it. We always like the same things."

"Well, it is a find," he conceded. "Gravity spring, good pasture land and a brook."

"That babbles?"

"In two languages, twice a year. Dry and flowing. Oh, and no garage, we have to build one—but a swell old barn."

"Wonderful, can we keep a cow?"

"Sure we can, there's room for everything. Chickens, pigs, horses, sheep——"

"I can't wait," breathed Claudia, clasping her hands. "When do we move?"

"By June, maybe."

"June? June's months away. Why not now, for goodness sake?"

"The place needs work. You don't want to live in a mess."

"Oh, I thought it was all ready just to walk into. Didn't you tell me it was one of the most beautiful old houses you ever saw?"

"It is. Pure salt box, 1760."

She looked blank.

"They call them that because they resemble the old-fashioned salt boxes," he elucidated.

"Oh," said Claudia. "That's cute," she added politely.

"It isn't cute," he returned, somewhat irritated. "It's a valid appellation for that particular type of architecture."

"All right, then it's interesting," she compromised. "Go on, don't quibble over details when I'm dying of curiosity. Tell me more about it. Begin from the beginning. What's the ground floor like? A lovely stairway?"

"A beauty," said David, with enthusiasm. "It hasn't been touched. It's just as it was a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Is that good?" she queried meekly.

"Of course it's good," said David. "The whole house is completely unspoiled, with all the old panelling and all the original hardware——"

"Hardware?"

"Doorpulls, hinges, latches——"

Claudia got the idea and nodded. "That's different. I couldn't imagine. I thought you meant axes and hammers and things like that."

He seemed agitated. "Look here," he demanded, "don't you know anything at all about old New England houses?"

"Not a thing," she acknowledged, cheerfully. "Why should I when I was born down South?"

He eyed her gloomily. "No reason, except that the wife of an architect ought to know a little something about a few things."

She stiffened. "Oh. If that's the way you feel about me, why do you always take my advice?"

"Because you're only dumb in spots. No logic but good hunches——"

"There's no hunch about buying a farm," she broke in firmly. "Even if you say I haven't got any logic, I think it's the only logical thing to do. Why should we go on paying rent for as long as we live?"

"Don't fool yourself, we'll still be paying rent."

Her eyes widened. "Are we going to keep this apartment, too?"

"Of course not. We can't afford to. But you have to count so much a month for the farm, just the same."

Her lips set stubbornly. "That's the most quixotic thing I ever heard—paying ourselves rent, when we own the place!"

"Listen. Try to get this through your head. You have to figure what your money would earn for you if it were invested in other ways?"

"What other ways?"

"Well, good stocks for one thing——"

"And end up with high blood pressure like your brother?"

"Hartley's no criterion. The market's his hobby. He takes chances because he's got a couple of million to fool around with."

"That's exactly what I mean. It's all right for a hobby, but nobody can afford to have money these days. As soon as we'd buy a stock, it'd go down. Then we'd buy some more because it was cheap—and then it would go down still further."

David looked sheepish. "It's been known to happen," he admitted.

"It's bound to happen," she corrected. "So you can't count interest that you wouldn't get, as rent."

"Theoretically, you have to."

"Who makes you?"

"Nobody makes you, stupid."

"Well, if nobody makes you, why do it? Listen. It's simple. Let's just take all the money your father left you, hurry up and stick it away in the farm, and pretend we never got it. Isn't that sensible?"

He grinned. "In a cockeyed sort of way I guess it is. But don't forget the interest on the mortgage," he remembered to remind her.

"Didn't I start off by saying we shouldn't have a mortgage?"

"It's wiser to carry one if you want to sell the place," he pointed out.

She sighed deeply. "Oh, darling; please be logical," she implored. "We'll never want to sell."

"Sure of that?" he asked her.

"I bet you twenty cents," she answered.

She could scarcely sleep for excitement, and was up and dressed

before the baby wakened the next morning.

"Hey—" David drowsily protested.

"Shhh—" said Claudia and skipped out to the kitchen, where Shakespeare emerged from beneath the tubs, dragging his paws as if each one were glued to the floor. Then he yawned, stretched himself into a great inverted arc, and fully awake, rubbed against her legs in greeting. She swooped him up. "What do you think, we're going to buy a gorgeous old house and have a hundred dogs!"

Shakespeare favoured her with his coldest stare and said nothing.

"So you don't like dogs?" she demanded and blew in his ear. He shook his head, leaping from her arms in indignation, and stalked from the room.

She set about making the formula. Bobby was practically on whole milk, but he wasn't quite off bottles, which meant that they still had to be scrubbed and boiled and rinsed every day. She didn't let Bertha attend to them because Bertha had never sterilized for her own babies. Not that Bertha would have cut any corners, it was simply that she didn't put much stock in modern methods and the temptations might have proved too great. Besides it was always nine o'clock by the time she came up from doing her own work downstairs and, from then on it was a terrific rush to get the heavy cleaning done and have Bobby out in the park by ten.

In bad weather the apartment shone—and vice versa. Sometimes, when David heard her begging it to rain, he said women were crazy and was there any law that a baby had to be out by ten? Claudia felt that there was—a kind of unwritten law that had to do particularly with Bobby—and it was a point of pride with her that Bertha was usually in the park ahead of even the nurses who wore veils. Claudia's mother couldn't understand why Claudia didn't let Bertha do the housework and take the baby out herself, but Claudia said she'd rather scrub floors than push a perambulator, or sit on a bench twiddling her thumbs. It was the same sort of thing as a lot of people preferring to wash dishes rather than dry them.

This morning Claudia thought of how different everything was going to be in the country. Spacious porches and rolling lawns, and Bobby running barefoot without anyone to watch him—"And how heavenly to own our own cow," she exulted, as she judiciously thinned the remainder of yesterday's half-pint of cream to make it last for breakfast. All the milk you wanted and no waiting for the milkman who was supposed to deliver at seven, but more often than not, never showed up until eight.

"Here he is now, thank goodness," she exclaimed aloud, as the hoarse call of the buzzer summoned her to the dumb-waiter.

But it wasn't the milkman, it was Fritz, collecting the garbage. "I loathe garbage," she muttered passionately, and closed her nostrils against the dank, sharp smell that issued from the shaft.

"Oh, Fritz!" she remembered to call down in the nick of time, "the living-room radiator isn't giving off much heat and the water doesn't run out of the sink fast enough."

"I come up there and fix him right away," said Fritz. He had become more a personal friend than a superintendent, but it was a nuisance anyway, to live in an old-fashioned building that was always having something wrong with it.

"Still want to buy a farm in the country?" David asked, when he entered the kitchen a few minutes later, shrugging into his coat. "Or have you changed your mind overnight?"

"Changed my mind!" cried Claudia. "My God, I simply can't wait! When can we go out to see it?"

"Right away," said David, who in a vast number of ways was the most satisfactory person in the world.

Claudia telephoned her mother. "We're catching the ten-forty train, could you keep an eye on the baby like an angel?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Brown, who was never averse to keeping an eye on Bobby. "What are you catching the train for?"

Claudia broke the news gently as she could under the pressure of time.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Brown, trying not to believe it, "people don't buy farms one-two-three.

"We're not people," said Claudia. "We're us and we do."

A small thick silence on the other end of the wire indicated that Mrs. Brown was fully aware that her daughter and son-in-law were not to be classed in the category of normal human beings. "Be sensible," she entreated. "Eight thousand dollars is a lot of money to throw about."

David, who was standing near the telephone, overheard. "Tell her it's nothing for this property," he prompted.

"David says it's nothing for this property," Claudia relayed with alacrity. "Roger Killian's an authority and he told David it was the find of a lifetime," she enlarged.

"Why doesn't Mr. Killian buy it himself if it's so grand?" Mrs. Brown asked a trifle acidly.

"Mr. Killian has two places already. But he says he wished he'd have discovered this one first, because it's simply the most marvellous place he's ever seen."

"I don't see how it can be so marvellous for only eight thousand dollars," Mrs. Brown argued.

Claudia looked baffled.

"What's she say?" asked David, tamping the tobacco in his pipe.

"She says it's not enough money," Claudia told him helplessly.

"I'll fix her." David grabbed the telephone.

"Hey, Mother—there's a grand room with three windows and a fireplace in it—and it's not going to be our room and it's not going to be the nursery——"

"What's she say?" asked Claudia tremulously, thinking that when a man was a darling to his mother-in-law he must certainly love his wife.

David chuckled. "She says go ahead and buy it," he replied.

Just as they were leaving, Julia telephoned to ask if they wanted to go to a recital that evening. "Beritza. She's really a fine soloist. I'm giving a reception at the house afterwards, and I'll expect you and David."

Claudia sighed. How often she wished that Julia was interested in the stage instead of music. One single operatic night would have made Claudia happier than all the concerts in the world. But then, she concluded, philosophically, theatre tickets probably wouldn't go begging, anyway.

This morning she was pleased to have a bona fide excuse for turning down two hours of undiluted singing. "We might drop in to the reception," she bargained, "but we won't be back in time for the recital. "We're going to buy a farm in Connecticut."

"Buy a farm?" Julia's rich voice raised its eyebrows. She didn't really want to be patronising, so she merely added, "You absurd children."

"I mean it," insisted Claudia. "An old salt shaker house——"

"Salt shaker? What in earth can that be?"

"It's a valid appellation for that particular type of architecture," Claudia loftily informed her.

"Don't you mean salt box?" asked Julia.

"That's right, salt box. Do you know what they are?"

"Of course. Where is it?"

"Eastbrook."

"Charming section," Julia approved. "The Riddles live there. I often cut off to see them on my way up to Boston. How old a house is it? How much acreage?"

Glowingly, Claudia repeated everything David had told her. Julia quickened with interest. "It sounds as if it might be the old Leach place!" she exclaimed. "I know it very well."

"Wait a minute," Claudia dropped the receiver in excitement.

"David! Come quick!" she called.

David couldn't come quick. Claudia shouted through the closed door, "David, is our house by any chance the old Leach house?"

"Yes." David shouted back to her. "Why?"

"Julia knows it!" she cried jubilantly. "It must be practically a show place!"

David muttered something to the effect that couldn't Claudia have taken his word for it, but she didn't stop to listen and flew back to her telephone.

"It is the Leach house," she reported proudly.

Julia was impressed for the first time since Claudia knew her. She said, "That farm has been in the family for generations. I'd no idea they'd sell."

"They wouldn't to just anybody," Claudia explained. "If David hadn't happened to be Roger Killian's partner, we'd never have heard about it."

"Well, you are in luck," said Julia. "It's a gem of an old house and David will do a beautiful job on it. I congratulate you. Hold on a second, Hartley wants to talk to you—he's in bed with indigestion."

Hartley said, hello there, what was all this about buying a farm?

Claudia told him, and Hartley was all for it, and said it was the smartest thing that they could do. "Put your money in the ground and lead the simple life," he said.

"That's exactly what we're going to do," said Claudia.

They had to hurry for the train. "I didn't dream," she marvelled as she trotted along at David's side. "that Julia would even know what a salt box was, much less know the very house."

"Julia's reasonably civilised"

"Meaning I'm not?"

"Something of the sort."

"Then why did you marry me?"

"I like ignoramuses."

"Listen," said Claudia, half in earnest, "one of these days I'm going to get insulted if you keep on making remarks about my intelligence."

"You're intelligent enough, darling. It's merely that you're a moron—but I love you just the same," he assured her quickly. "In fact, I love you a lot more than if you were bright." He kissed her right on the street, and an elderly lady turned around and muttered, "Tch-tch."

"She probably thinks I'm a loose woman," said Claudia, highly gratified.

Roger Killian, who happened to be in Redbury for the day, met them at the station and drove them over to Eastbrook—a little town about fifteen miles inland. He was a smallish man with white hair, and he reminded Claudia—for no good reason, although David said he could see what she meant—of a seamstress. Mr. Killian's voice, which was high, and the way he said "perfly beautiful," always made it difficult for her to remember that he had three sons and was one of the foremost architects of America.

She was eternally grateful that David had a fine deep voice and had, upon one memorable occasion, deliberately turned her over his knee and spanked her. He was strong as an ox and all her kicking and squirming and biting had made absolutely no impression on him. The unfair part of it was that all she'd done was to go downtown to buy some aluminium pots at a sale. But that was the very thing that made him angry, because he said she was just like a dope fiend when it came to a sale, and couldn't she understand that if a thing was reduced there must be something wrong with it?

"Not pots," she had interrupted hotly. "A pot is a pot, you fool!"

He'd changed his tactics. "Very well, how much did you save?"

She hedged a little. "A third off."

"Which means about forty cents," he pursued relentlessly, "and for forty cents you ruin your health."

That was the whole trouble. He couldn't seem to forget that she had almost died when Bobby was born, and although he didn't believe in doctors for himself, he took it for gospel truth that she'd have to be put in a glass case for a year. Mrs. Brown said she gloried in the way he handled her daughter, because no one else had ever been able to do anything with her, and when she heard about the spanking she was delighted. Secretly, Claudia was delighted, too. It was pleasant to be married to an architect, and a cave-man combined. She was almost certain that Mr. Killian was only an architect.

He was really a lovely person, however, and as they drove out to see the farm he told her about the old panelling and the original hardware. Of course, she'd heard it all from David, but she adored listening to it over again. It didn't bore her any more than it would have bored her to hear a thousand times in succession that Bobby was the most marvellous baby in the world. Indeed, she felt almost the same thrill as when she found out that he was coming. The only difference was that it took months and months before she could see what he looked like, and in a very

few minutes she was going to see her first house. Her heart began to pound in anticipation. She leaned forward in her seat. "Which side will it be on?" she whispered to David.

"This side. What do you think of the country around here?"

"Fine," she said. "It's sort of wild, though, nobody else hardly seems to be living in the neighbourhood," she noticed suddenly.

"Of course not," he returned. "We own practically all the land across the bridge."

"Oh," she said in awe.

The car drew to a stop. At first she thought they had run out of gas. Then David said, "Here we are," and Mr. Killian said, "It's perfly beautiful, it really is," and the chauffeur jumped out and opened the door for them.

Claudia blinked. Yes, they had stopped in front of an old house. Small and square, and weathered to the colour of the bare March landscape, it was the sort of house that a child might draw on paper, not too well, with four straight lines and a slanting roof, and boxes for windows and doors.

"Is this it?" she asked, wanting to be facetious.

"It's it," said David.

There was a quality of pride in his voice that arrested her. Nonplussed, she searched his face. She searched Roger Killian's face. He was looking straight ahead of him, head thrown back and eyes squinted. "I wouldn't touch that entrance, David," he said reverently. "It's perfly beautiful."

"It's a crime even to paint it," David agreed. He put his arm around Claudia. "Close your mouth, darling, you look like a guppy fish. Well, what do you think of it? Is it the way you pictured it?"

Claudia got her mouth closed and wet her lips. "I thought it would be set farther back from the road," she said faintly, but refrained from adding that she had visualised an enormous mansion, at the end of a winding driveway with a march of aged oaks.

"All the old houses are close to the road," David smugly informed her.

"Is that good or bad?" she murmured.

"Good," said David. "You'd have to be ploughed out in a snowstorm if you weren't near the road. Want to go inside, or look around outside first?"

She cast a brief glance about. As far as her eyes could reach she saw only a bleak wilderness of trees and shrubs. She shivered. "Better come inside out of the cold," he quickly advised.

He was an optimist. As they entered the tiny hall the unused and unwarmed air of centuries greeted them with stale, chill

fingers. But Claudia scarcely noticed. The whole thing was suddenly clear to her. What a fool she'd been not to have guessed it at once! David thought she didn't know anything about old houses, so he'd played a joke on her and shown her some tumble-down shack, just to see how she'd react. Afterwards he'd shown her the real house—the beautiful house with the gorgeous paneling, the house that Julia said was a gem—which was probably up on a hill, or hiding around some corner. He didn't play many jokes on her, because he always said she was so gullible, it was a shame to take the money. This time, however, he wasn't going to get away with anything—she'd turn the tables on him.

"Oh," she cried, before he could ask her how she liked it, "isn't it too divine!" She looked up at the narrow, steep, rickety steps and clasped her hands in ecstasy. "Oh, that delightful old stairway!" she exclaimed. "So much more charm than the big circular ones we have down South!"

"Ah, but Southern architecture is Palladian and very delightful, too, in its place," Roger generously conceded, rubbing his hand over the huge rusty latch on the open door. Claudia glanced at him. Not even a twinkle in his eye. So he was in on this, too, she thought grimly. Well, she'd show them that her training as an actress hadn't gone for nothing. When they finally took her to the real house, she'd pretend not to like it at all.

"That gorgeous old latch must be one of the original pieces of hardware!" she exclaimed.

"It is," said Roger. "It dates back from before the house was built."

"A veritable museum-piece," she breathed and caressed the square bulk of corroded brass with a deference equal to his own.

She was aware of David's eyes upon her—probing and incredulous. "Well, bless my soul," he said, "I didn't know you had it in you."

She observed him coolly. "Did you imagine I was an utter imbecile?" she inquired with an ironic innuendo.

Roger Killian seemed very much tickled by the situation. "D'you know, I think he did," he confided to her. "He warned me that you didn't know the first thing about old houses."

Inwardly, Claudia blazed. She'd guessed right; David had thought he could trade on her ignorance, pull her leg. "Well, Mr. Smarty," she addressed him silently, "if you're waiting for me to throw a fit over this old barn, you're going to be mighty disappointed. It would serve you good and right if I insisted on fixing it and living in it."

She wondered, for an instant, if it could really be done, and then

she thought, as she looked up at the low ceilings and crumbling plaster, "Why cut off my nose to spite my face?" It would be enough to pay him back in his own coin.

She controlled her fury and gave an impression of dimpling, though she didn't have a dimple to her name. "I've never been so thrilled in my life," she said, making her voice deep and wavy like Julia's. "Hurry and show me upstairs." Then let's get down to business, she muttered to herself.

There wasn't very much to see upstairs. Two rooms and a huge attic, which David said with a straight face was going to make a superb nursery, and a couple of baths. "Notice the floors," he instructed her.

"I have," she said tersely. "I almost broke my neck."

"They need a little repairing here and there," admitted Roger. "But they're perfly beautiful. Random oak in every room and not a board less than ten inches."

"Marvellous!" cried Claudia, running out of adjectives, but willing to keep it up as long as they did.

"And here's some of the panelling up here, too," David pointed out. "The original colour. You'll find the same shade of old blue in the American wing at the Metropolitan."

"I've got a client who'd pay a thousand dollars for that strip just as it is," said Roger.

"I wouldn't sell it!" Claudia indignantly proclaimed. "Not for all the money in the world!"

She knew that she was losing her subtle touch, but so for that matter were they. They had, both of them, begun to teeter back and forth from toe to heel, and now they were jumping up and down and looking very silly indeed.

"What's the idea of *that*?" she asked querulously, meaning to imply, "I'm cold and fagged, and at this point I don't even think you're funny."

Her impatience was lost upon them. "Couple of loose joists," David explained.

"Couple of loose screws," she felt like retorting, but before she could choose the words with which to end the tiresome farce there was a terrific crash, followed by a volcano of white plaster and a choking rise of dust. Roughly, David pulled Claudia towards safety, while Roger nimbly vaulted sideways.

"The ceiling fell down," said Claudia blankly.

"That's nothing," said Roger. "They usually do in old houses."

"But won't we have to pay somebody for it?" she exclaimed aghast.

"Pay for it?" David echoed. "Who should we pay? It belongs to us; we're buying the damn place!"

The way he said damn was like a caress. Tender blasphemy the same as he'd call Bobby a damn little rascal, but really meant that he was the pride and joy of his life. Damn place. Damn little rascal. It was a small thing, but it made her know. This was no joke. This was deadly, horribly earnest. There wasn't any other house. There was only this house and she would have to live in it for the rest of her life because it was too late now to tell them the way she really felt about old houses. Or was it? She caught at David's arm.

"David!"

He looked at her in alarm. "Why, Claudia, what's the matter? You're white as a ghost."

"Shock," said Roger.

"Yes, shock." Her voice went off to a bleat.

"I don't wonder," Roger sympathised. "A lot of people don't like ceilings falling down on them."

David, however, knew that she wasn't the sort of person to mind a ceiling falling down. He kept on looking at her and remembering how she'd started off with Bobby. "Darling," his eyes implored her, worried, "are you——?"

Of course she wasn't, but she couldn't go into that now, in front of Roger Killian. She couldn't say anything in front of Roger. There was nothing to do but let David think whatever he wanted to. Roger, too, was evidently getting the same idea by this time, for he said solicitously that she really did look rather dreadful and he was going to drive her straight back to New York, and that was all there was to it.

She felt abject with guilt as they tucked a fur rug around her feet and made her comfortable. David took her hand underneath it and tried not to let on that he was counting her pulse. He must have found her heartbeat quite normal, for he said abruptly, "Maybe you're hungry."

It would have been selfish of her not to set his fears at rest, so she said she was, and Roger drew up before a roadside restaurant shaped like a seashell and, in order to further reassure David, Claudia ordered a lobster dinner and ate it all.

"There's certainly nothing really wrong with you," he concluded, much relieved.

"You don't know the half of it," she thought bitterly. Nor was she going to tell him until they were alone in bed that night and the lights were out. It always had been, and probably always would be, the best place in the world to tell things.

It was almost nine o'clock when Roger dropped them at their door. Claudia's mother was waiting for them—tired and a little dishevelled, but thoroughly happy after her day with Bobby. Claudia's heart sank. This was a complication she hadn't expected, for Bertha was to have stayed for the evening.

"I wanted to hear all about the house, so I let Bertha go," Mrs. Brown greeted them, "and everything's fine; the baby's fine; I took him to the park while Bertha cleaned the silver."

"That's fine," said Claudia lamely. "Thanks."

Mrs. Brown put down a sock that she was mending and removed her glasses. "Well, what was it like? Was it really as grand as you expected?"

Claudia cleared her throat. She didn't know what to say and she didn't know how to say it. But David spoke ahead of her.

"She was nuts about it," he announced with pride, and looked both pleased and happy.

All at once Claudia knew the answer. Marriage was like that—a slow and sometimes painful rebirth of two souls. David's soul was all right, though—it was probably only hers that needed work, for two of the foremost architects of America couldn't possibly be wrong. If it took to the end of her lifetime, she was going to learn to love that house, she was going to learn to appreciate old things.

She slipped her hand in his. "It's perfly beautiful," she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

SIMPLE LIFE

THE new maid got off the train and looked like a halibut. Claudia's heart sank. She would have preferred her to look like almost anything but a halibut. A bulldog, an anteater, a horse—a horse would have been fine—but not a halibut.

"I'm Mrs. Naughton," Claudia introduced herself.

Hardly anybody ever believed she was old enough to be a married woman, but the new maid registered neither surprise nor interest in the fact that her prospective mistress was not a middle-aged lady with the beginnings of a double-chin.

"What's your name?" Claudia pursued, as she led the way to the car.

"Emma Katsey."

The girl's voice was faint and watery, just as a fish might talk if a fish talked, and her shoulder sagged bonelessly beneath the weight of the straw valise. Claudia couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. She had never engaged anyone sight unseen before, and waiting for the train had been rather exciting, particularly since the agency had given such a glowing account of Emma's unusual capabilities. "She sounds marvellous, we're in luck," Claudia had exulted to David that morning. "I bet we have finger-bowls at every meal."

"I'd rather have good coffee at every meal," said David, who felt that bad coffee—or no coffee—was the basis of many unhappy marriages. "We haven't had a decent cup of coffee since Bertha," he added gloomily.

"Bertha was a joy," Claudia readily conceded. But Bertha was not the sort of servant to complement the remodelled perfection of the salt box house. Secretly, Claudia dreamed of a trim, beautifully trained maid in a pastel uniform, and although she hadn't found one up to date, she had the feeling that the Elite Agency was going to send her the answer to that dream.

"Did you ever live on a farm?" she queried, as she moved

the grocery bundles aside in order to make room on the front seat.

"Not on a farm," said Emma, with no expression whatsoever.

Claudia pondered the possibilities implied in the provocative rejoinder.

"Where *did* you live?" she invited brightly.

"For a Mrs. Morris," said Emma, looking vague.

Claudia tried to bear in mind that David, who had known Coolidge personally, had often told her what a wonderful person he was underneath—very dynamic and strong, although you'd never have suspected it. Perhaps the Halibut was the same type as Coolidge. Claudia drew a deep breath and began all over again.

"Where, for a Mrs. Morris?"

"Flatbush."

"Oh."

Claudia felt let down. Flatbush was probably as good as any place and the Morrisses might have been a wonderful family, but they sounded like children and paper napkins. Not that she objected to paper napkins, and children were all to the good, but she had rather set her heart on one-plate-at-a-time service, for Julia was stopping off for lunch the following day on one of her chronic trips to Boston.

It was funny how Julia always roused in Claudia a slightly competitive spirit. David said he couldn't understand it, for Claudia's values were pretty straight, but Claudia said not to worry about it, it was perfectly natural for in-laws to feel that way about each other and had nothing to do with anybody's real character.

Now, brooding doubtfully upon the fresh shrimps she had just bought as the main luncheon dish, Claudia wondered whether the Halibut had ever ventured very far afield from steak and chops.

"This is different from Flatbush," she judiciously gave warning.

Emma made no reply.

"A lot more lovely," ended Claudia lamely, waving her hand toward the bleak countryside fanning past. (Pretty-pretty garbage to carry out to the incinerator every day, and butter to churn, and milk pails to clean, she inwardly elaborated.)

Emma continued to say nothing. Her silence made Claudia nervous. "We're almost there," she offered hastily, and stepped on the gas so that the last five miles might seem as nothing.

As they neared the house she felt that she must, at any cost, clear up certain major issues that would have to be faced sooner or later. As a matter of fact there was a small mountain of rompers and bibs awaiting Emma's immediate arrival. "I sup-

pose," she essayed in her most casual voice, "that the agency told you about laundry?"

"They said light wash," the Halibut specified feebly but firmly.

Claudia debated the moot point of whether Bobby's frequent change of linen—black of knee and soggy of bosom—could justly be classed in the category of light wash. She glanced at the Halibut's face, which had settled into a mask of obdurate inactivity, and decided to let well enough alone. Perhaps Emma would become so devoted to Bobby—as Bertha had been—that nothing would be too much for her. "It's mostly just the baby's few little things," she murmured. "Do you like babies?"

Emma gave an imperceptible shrug. "I don't mind them," she said without enthusiasm.

Claudia's heart lifted. At least Emma didn't mind them, which was a relief after Sophie and Annie-before-Sophie. She would probably prove quite satisfactory after all. True, she didn't have much magnetism, but it was just as well, because there was no sense in having a lot of magnetism when you couldn't go out nights, anyway. Magnetism, or something like it, had been the trouble with Katie.

Abruptly they came upon the house, sitting like a small surprise in the lap of the bend. Claudia always found it difficult to realise that it was the same crude tumbledown building that she had looked at on that raw March day less than a year ago. Yes, David and Roger had been right. Beauty dwelt in its simple ancient dignity, but who, except a brace of architects could have suspected it? And who, besides a seasoned veteran, could have lived through those gruelling months of restoration, when the carpenters didn't show up during the fishing season, and the plumbers went to the town meeting, and the stonemasons threw down their trowels every now and again to maintain their social standing on the relief rolls? Claudia tore her hair out. But David told her it wouldn't get her anywhere. "It's New England," he summed up philosophically.

At long last, many, many weeks after the glib finishing date set by the contractor, the workmen gathered up their tools and left the Naughtons to a paradise of exquisite peace and order. Claudia missed them. "Like a toothache," she amended. Still, she missed them and she was always touched when, on Sundays, they drove past with their wives or sweethearts and slowed up before the gate, with a proprietary air. Sometimes, utter strangers also stopped to look. David always raised a howl and threatened to use a shotgun on them. "Those blasted busybodies?" he'd cry, just as if he meant it. "Go on," Claudia would nudge him

wickedly, "you know you love it, invite them in, show them around, offer them a cigar."

She was so used to having people rave about the place that she expected the Halibut to at least change her expression as the car drew to a stop in the driveway. By this time she'd resigned herself to the fact that Emma wasn't the sort to go into convulsions of joy over anything on earth, but certainly the picture-book quality of the salt box house should have elicited some faint reaction.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she prompted.

The Halibut glanced out of the window. Her opinion was to remain an eternal mystery in Claudia's life, for at that instant Emma froze in terror and she uttered a shrill scream for help, as Bluff and Bluster dashed to the running-board in welcome, and raked at the glass with their gargantuan paws, "What are they?" she gasped.

"Only dogs," said Claudia, which was somewhat of an understatement, for Bluff and Bluster were probably the biggest and most ferocious-looking Great Danes in existence. Claudia, herself, had approached them with considerable trepidation the night David had brought them home, but he had explained that they were probably a great deal more frightened of her than she was of them. "Danes are very sensitive," he cautioned her. "Never speak loudly to them, or make any sudden move to startle them."

"I won't," Claudia had promised. "I'll be very gentle."

Fortunately no one in Eastbrook suspected that the dogs were sissies, and David said it wasn't necessary to carry burglar insurance, or to worry about the baby being kidnapped. Only last week, however, a tree surgeon from Redbury came very near guessing the truth. Having discovered that he remained quite unscarred after the vicious hullabaloes that attended his previous visits, he slyly inquired why the dogs were named as they were. It was a Saturday and David happened to be at home. David didn't like the tree surgeon, who had thrown Claudia into a panic by intimating that all their priceless old maples would languish if not braced and filled and pruned at once.

"What's wrong with the names Bluff and Buster?" David belligerently demanded.

"Oh," the tree surgeon apologised, "I thought it was Bluff and Bluster."

"You thought wrong," said David shortly. He whistled to them. "Hi, Bluff! Hi, Bluster!" he called, and walked off to the barn with the dogs prancing at his heels.

The tree surgeon turned to Claudia with a bewildered shrug.

Claudia blushed. "My husband's a Chinaman," she murmured, and the tree surgeon took to his heels and was never heard from again.

Expediency as well as pride constrained them to foster the legend of ferocity, but in the case of the Halibut, Claudia knew that at this point a false front might prove fatal. "Don't be upset," she shouted above the volley of barking. "They just like to make believe they're fierce but they wouldn't hurt a fly."

Emma, however, didn't believe the story for an instant and sidled fearfully into the house, glued to Claudia's side. It was unfortunate that Shakespeare should have chosen the very moment of their entrance to pull his tiger act. From an unseen vantage point on the kitchen window sill he leapt through the air and landed with a heavy plop at the newcomer's feet.

Emma shrieked, dropping her suitcase.

"It's only the cat," Claudia hastened to explain.

Emma didn't like cats, but Shakespeare didn't know it. He edged his beautiful supple body against her legs and, with a deft paw, plucked a single thread of her stocking and started a runner.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Claudia murmured in abject apology.

Emma said nothing. She stood in the middle of the blue-and-white tiled floor, looking more than ever like a halibut, with her heavy lips an inverted arc of unvoiced disapproval.

"It's a lovely kitchen, everything so nice and clean and modern," Claudia pointed out encouragingly.

Emma continued to say nothing.

"I'll show you your room," Claudia went on. "We built on this ell and it's a lovely room with three exposures."

She moved invitingly toward a small passageway leading from the pantry, but Emma made no pretence of following. Her flaccid face developed unsuspected planes of firm decision. She picked up her suitcase.

"I don't like the place," she stated with flat finality. "I wouldn't stay."

Claudia called for David on the 6.14, reluctantly leaving Bobby to the care of a neighbouring schoolgirl. "How is she?" he asked elliptically, the first thing after he kissed her.

"Simply marvellous," Claudia returned, out of the welling bitterness in her heart.

"That's a break. Move," he said, and shoved her along to the other end of the seat.

Her anger flared. "What's the matter? Doesn't my driving suit you?"

"Nope," he admitted pleasantly.

The tears came. She had been trying to hold them back for the last hour, but now they came, running down her cheeks and flooding her voice. "That's the most unjust thing I ever heard of. Just because I got one little ticket and banged one little fender, you keep making remarks about it, and I won't stand for it!"

He stared at her and then turned off the ignition. "What's the matter, darling?" he said gently. "Didn't she come?"

Claudia nodded and gulped. "She's gone."

It was too fast for him. "You mean she never showed up?"

"I said she's gone," Claudia reiterated shrilly. "She came and she didn't like it and she's gone, and you should have married someone who could manage servants and run your house and drive your car."

He took her in his arms and held her just like she always held Bobby when he bumped his head. He gave her his handkerchief.

She mumbled. "Everybody can see us."

He said, "Let them. Who cares? Look, darling, cheer up. She couldn't have been much good, anyway."

"She looked like a fish," sobbed Claudia.

"Well, then," he placated her, drying her eyes with his handkerchief, "you certainly wouldn't have wanted her. Blow. That's a good girl."

He was simply a darling and did his best to help her with supper, only he wasn't a very good help. She asked him to open a can of tomatoes, but instead of doing it he discovered that the automatic opener lacked a screw. "What dam' fool," he demanded furiously, "used this for a hammer?"

"Nobody used it for a hammer. If you don't mind, I'm waiting for the tomatoes."

He said something uncomplimentary about females not having any mechanical ability, opened the can and then got under her feet while he looked for the screw.

"Listen," she suggested with veiled irony, wanting to kill two birds with one stone, "how about getting out of the kitchen? Take Bobby's supper upstairs and feed him for me."

She should have known better. Bobby was at an age where he wouldn't swallow what he didn't like. David shortly reappeared with blazing eyes and practically the whole dish of cereal on his coat. He was also full of theories on child-training.

"Oh, hush up," said Claudia, under her breath.

"—And don't help me with the dishes, for heaven's sake," she anticipated him after supper.

He wasn't the least offended. "All right," he said. "I'll go out and take a look at the cow, if you're sure you don't need me."

She said, "I was never so sure of anything in all my life."

The dogs, whom she had banished from the kitchen, were waiting for him outside the door. She could hear his voice rising loud and full above the frenzy of their greeting. "Wouldn't the boss let you in? Oh, the bad woman. Good old Bluffy! Good old Bluster!" She wondered if he knew how silly he sounded, more like a half-wit than a grown man. She loved him when he acted that way.

Through the window, as she stacked the dishes, she saw the light go up in the barn and hang like a jewel in the dead winter blackness. It gave her suddenly the same sort of lost and lonely feeling as the scream of a train whistle sounding through the night. It made her want David to come quickly back to her. It made her want to run upstairs to look at Bobby, fast asleep in bed. It made her want to telephone her mother in New York. She thought, "Maybe I just don't like living in the country——"

The knowledge came as a shock to her. She was no better, really, than Annie or Sophie or even Emma. They all had the same thing in common—they couldn't face the solitude and the vastness.

By the time David returned her nerves were on edge. His cheek was cool against her hot one and there was the lingering odour of barn and dogs about him.

"Nothing doing with the cow," he said, pulling off his jacket.

He felt the radiator. "Not any too much heat. I'd better have a look at the furnace." He departed, whistling, to the cellar.

"He doesn't mind anything he does around the place," thought Claudia. He didn't mind feeding the stock, or sweeping off the paths, or cleaning out the chicken coops. Although they had a farmer down the road come in to do the milking and the chores, he was drunk more often than not and, in the duck-shooting season, scarcely showed up at all. David wanted to find someone else, but the community offered very little that was better in the way of hired help. "Don't worry about it," he told Claudia. "I can get home earlier, nights, and do the job myself, particularly since the cow's gone dry."

He had spent summers on his grandfather's farm and knew things that were Greek to Claudia, who had been brought up to regard with closed eyes the basic functions of the animal kingdom. It was still a source of wonder to her how he had known the proper time to have the cow mated. "A little birdie told me," he informed her gravely.

As a matter of fact, she was only vaguely interested in the life

that lay outside the house. There was too much to keep her busy indoors.

Tonight, as she lay in bed, she wondered how on earth she could plough through the thousand and one things that had to be done before Julia's arrival the next morning. Julia hadn't seen the house since it was finished. She had driven up once, with Hartley, while it was still in the process of construction, with no doors hung anywhere at all, which was a great disadvantage, especially to visitors who had come a long distance. Hartley had said, looking all around the garden and the new fences, and the copper piping that was going in, "This is great. Put your money in the ground. But——" he had amended knowingly, "don't put too much in. A couple of years and you'll be back in New York like the rest of them."

"Never!" Claudia and David had cried in a single breath. And indeed it had been wonderful in the beginning. She would never forget the day that David scythed the meadow, with his shut off, and came in to lunch looking and smelling like a hired man out of a book. She'd fallen in love with him all over again. "Darling," she'd marvelled, putting her arms around him, "you're so wonderfully sweaty." It was a very special, very stirring kind of sweat and had given her exactly the same feeling as the first time she'd watched him bath the baby. "I adore it here," she'd breathed out of the fullness of her heart.

"Glad we bought this place?" His voice was almost as husky as hers.

"Oh, but am I?" she whispered back. "Are you?"

"You bet," he'd whispered in return.

She had often looked back to that day, trying to recapture the simple flowing rhythm of existence. She had lost it somehow. Life had become complicated all at once and everything seemed to go wrong. The roof leaked, the rhododendrons lost their leaves in a blight and the cow developed pneumonia, for which the veterinary came four times at ten dollars a visit. A day or so later Bobby broke out with the mumps, but the local doctor only charged three dollars a visit, which was a vague source of disgruntlement to Claudia. "You could pay him ten dollars a visit, too, if it would make you feel any better," David mildly proposed.

"That's not the point," Claudia had argued hotly. "I actually think you're more concerned for Louella than for your own child."

"Louella's a swell cow," said David.

Claudia made no reply. She was grateful, of course, for all the

milk and cream and butter—and also for the not inconsiderable by-product of lovely roses—but when Louella went dry on account of the calf that was soon to be born it was heavenly simple just to buy two quarts of milk every day from the grocery store. "What's the matter?" David had demanded suspiciously. "Don't you like having your own dairy products?"

She had wanted to cry out, "No, I don't, it's a terrible damned nuisance," but she couldn't bear to hurt him. She had sensed that it satisfied some deep need within him to know that he and the land were friends, and that he could work it, and, in return, it would nourish and protect him. "I love having our own dairy products," she had answered gently, but in her heart she wept, for she was aware that she had always lied to him, a little, about the way she really felt about the place.

For a while, she had almost fooled herself into believing that it meant as much to her as it did to him. But now the lie was catching up with her and there was no ease within her. She was just like a hundred other housewives—ridden with servant trouble and her nails a mess. She wondered how David always managed to be so philosophical about everything—unless, of course, something like the can-opener made him mad, or the way she drove the car.

He heard her tossing restlessly beside him. "What's the matter, can't you sleep?"

"I am asleep," she answered.

By half-past eleven the next morning the house literally sparkled with cleanliness and luncheon stood ready on the stove. "I'm amazing," she thought modestly. "I wonder how I did it."

It was lucky that shrimp curry stretched, because Julia brought a friend with her—Carra Beritza, the opera singer. Claudia had met her at Julia's once or twice, and remembered the enormous brown eyes in the small sallow face. Her hat was enormous, too, which made her seem even tinier than she really was. She had a helpless childlike air and, when she met people, she always looked as if she were going to kiss them, but didn't.

"Is it not naughty of me to come without an invitation?" she begged Claudia's forgiveness. "I am giving a concert in Boston this evening, so I am clever and say to Jooliaa, 'Jooliaa, I want a heetch.'"

"I'm glad you didn't," Claudia murmured, wondering how to divide one single grapefruit into three.

"Claudia, I love it," Julia interrupted in her brusque, distin-

guishing manner. "This living-room is charming, utterly charming!"

Claudia forgot the grapefruit. "Do you really think so?"

"Oh, but yes, eet is enchanting!" cried Beritza, with one of her enormous gestures.

"I must see everything from kitchen to attic," Julia went on, being her most satisfactory self and not a bit patronising. "Beritza's interested in old houses, too; she wants to buy one before she goes to Hollywood."

"I want to buy thees one!" Beritza suddenly exclaimed. "No, but my dear, I mean it, I mean it, I mean it! I am not in joking. *I want to buy thees house!*" She stood in the middle of the floor with her hands clasped and her eyes closed, like someone in a trance. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Eet is what I have dreamed. Eet is my perfect setting, Jooliaa, is it not?"

"Don't be absurd, Carra. These youngsters are mad about their place——"

Beritza turned to Claudia. "But you will sell it to me, no? You can make yourselves another one?"

Claudia laughed. "Oh, of course. But you'd better see the rest of it, then maybe you'll change your mind and won't want it."

"No, I weel not change my mind," said Beritza. "I weel want it, I am like that. I am—how you call it?—all feelings and no logic——"

Claudia was arrested. "That's funny," she said. "That's exactly what my husband says that I am, too——"

"Eet is the artist in the both of us," said Beritza, sagely. "You write—or perhaps you paint—it is not?"

Claudia's heart warmed to her, even though she wasn't crazy about musicians as a rule. "I was going on the stage and then I got married," she admitted.

"Ah!" Beritza cried triumphantly.

She went into ecstasies over the upstairs. "How much?" she entreated. "How much can I have it for furniture and everything?"

Naturally Claudia no more dreamed that she was in earnest than the man in the moon. "Thirty thousand," she glibly retorted, saying the first outrageous sum that came into her mind.

"Thirty thousand!" echoed Beritza, on a crescendo of negation.

"Why, that's cheap," Claudia broke in indignantly, feeling like an actress instead of a housewife for the first time in months. "It's absolutely nothing for a hundred acres of valuable property and a historic old house, superbly decorated and remodelled by one of the most famous young architects in America!"

She was aware that Julia was looking at her strangely. She laughed, reckless and elated. No wonder Julia was puzzled—Julia had never seen her anything but serious. "Thirty thousand," she reiterated, "is giving it away."

"But eet is *throwing* it away!" exclaimed Beritza, playing along in good style. "Why, eet is nothing! Eet is a mere fraction of what I weel get to make my first picture in Hollywood!"

"Oh, dear," mourned Claudia. "If I had known that, I would have made it fifty."

Beritza pretended to pout, but her red lips grew suddenly thin and set. "No, it is a bargain. You said it. I pay it. Thirty and not a penny more."

Claudia could be playful only so long and no longer.

Even good comedy could pall and become stupid. "Sold," she acquiesced, a trifle bored.

Beritza clapped her hands. "See, Jooliaa!"

Julia caught Claudia's eye. "I want to wash up before starting off," she said.

She pulled Claudia into the bathroom after her and shut the door. "Listen, you chump, are you joking about all this?"

"Oh, don't be silly, of course I am."

"Well," said Julia shortly, "Beritza's not."

"Not?" gasped Claudia.

"Not," said Julia.

"Oh, I can't believe it. Why should she imagine I'd be in earnest, asking a price like thirty thousand? Why, David was reckoning out the other night, it's only cost us half that much. The woman's cuckoo!"

Julia began to laugh hysterically. "On the contrary, she's known to have one of the shrewdest business heads on two continents. Congratulations, my little financial genius. It's not everybody that can make a hundred per cent profit on a year's investment!"

Claudia sat down on the edge of the tub. Through the whirling of her senses she realised that Julia thought she was a lot smarter than she really was.

She counted the minutes until David came home. He noticed with approval that she looked very pretty and not at all tired for a change.

"I'll be right back, Skinnymalink."

"Oh, no you don't!" She pushed him into a chair. "Sit down. I have something to tell you."

"Can't it wait? I want to look at the cow."

"The cow's all right."

"Did you go out to see her?"

"No——" (It hadn't occurred to her to do so.)

"Then how do you know she's all right?"

"Oh, because she is," she answered impatiently. "Listen." She couldn't keep it to herself another second. "I sold the place today for thirty thousand dollars. That is," she added politely, "if you're agreeable."

"That's fine," he said.

He didn't believe her. He didn't believe her even when she told him everything that had happened. He listened with one ear and then dismissed the story as a lot of nonsense. "She was taking you for a ride," he said, and started up from his chair.

"David, wait a minute! She means every word of it. You see, practically all the movie stars have Connecticut farms—Madame Beritza and her favourite pig, and all that sort of thing——"

"You mean you'd leave the animals for her!" he interjected on a shout.

"Not Shakespeare," said Claudia. "We can keep Shakespeare in New York, but I don't see how we can keep a cow and sheep and two Great Danes——"

"Doesn't she want Bobby thrown in?" he queried caustically.

"No, because she's going to adopt a baby. They all do."

David gently but firmly dislodged Claudia from his lap and stood up. He took a pipe and filled it. He puffed at it for quite a long time before he spoke.

"Listen, Claudia, I think this dame is screwy and I don't believe she'll come across. But if she should——" He tossed the match into the fireplace and looked at her—a long searching look. "Would you actually want to go ahead with it?"

Claudia felt her pulses quicken a little. "Wouldn't it be idiotic not to? After all, fifteen thousand is more than you could make in a whole year, working hard."

"A hell of a lot more," said David slowly. "But where do we go from here?"

"I've got it all planned out. A hotel until we find an apartment, and Bertha to help us out with Bobby." A note of eagerness crept into her voice. She was so sure that Beritza intended to buy the place that she could at last unburden all that was in her heart. "Oh, David," she cried. "I'd have rather died than say anything—I'd have just stuck it out, making believe I adored it, if this hadn't happened. But people who own places are just crazy, when they can live in an apartment and let someone else do the worrying. Honestly, didn't we spend just about half in New York?"

"We had just about half, too," said David.

"That's true. Half the inconvenience, half the work, half the boredom. A farm is beautiful in theory, but it just doesn't work out as far as I can see. Burying yourself in the country all year round doesn't *give* you anything——"

"I thought it did," said David quietly. He emptied his pipe and slipped it in his pocket. "When does she want to move in?"

"Right away, so she can have the photographers."

"Impossible!"

"No, it's not! Don't we do everything quick?"

"That's right," said David.

His voice didn't sound quite natural. She sobered. "David, aren't you pleased at making a hundred per cent profit on your money, in a slump when everyone's busted?"

"Who wouldn't be?" he answered. "But don't count on it too much, Claudia."

"She'll take it," said Claudia confidently. "I bet you twenty cents."

Suddenly, he put his hands on her shoulders. "Gosh, dear, you should have told me that you hated it."

"Not hated it. exactly. David——"

He said, "You've been a good sport about it, anyway." He left her quickly and went out to the barn.

Claudia's mother arrived the next morning, in answer to Claudia's call, with her elderly black hat slightly askew and her joy becoming tempered with reservation. She held Bobby to her lap and spoiled him, while Claudia got ready to catch the noon train into town. "So he's coming back to his old grandma," she kept saying over and over. She looked around the many-windowed nursery, with sun pouring in from every side. "You'll never find another room like this for him in the city," she commented.

"Who wants it?" Claudia flippantly retorted. "It's three times larger than it need be."

Luck was with her, as she had somehow known it would be. She found, immediately, a very pleasant suite in a residential hotel not very far from their old neighbourhood. The rooms seemed a little cramped and stuffy, but they would serve very nicely indeed until she found the right apartment. She told the manager that she was practically certain of taking them, and hurried off to make the proper arrangements with Bertha.

The immaculate little flat smelled just the same as she remembered it—warm and comfortable, and faintly redolent of onion.

"I wonder," she thought, as she rang the bell, "if all superintendents' flats smell like that."

Bertha opened the door and peered out. "Ach, my Mrs. Naughton. Come in, come in! Fritz, look only who is here!"

Fritz was just as happy to see her as Bertha. "How is the boy?" he asked, with his nice funny teeth fanning out of his broad smile.

"Fine," said Claudia.

"Big, yah?" Bertha beamed. "Und tell us about the farm——" Claudia told them.

"Ach!" mourned Bertha. "It's too bad to sell it. Such a nice farm. We were talking only last night, Fritz und me——"

"Mamma!" Fritz sharply intervened. "Lots of people don't like the country, that's all right, too——"

"Of course, natürlich," Bertha agreed, getting a little red. Then she quickly changed the subject.

"Will Bertha help you out?" David asked Claudia as he rushed her along like the White Queen, to catch the last train to Eastbrook that night.

Claudia nodded. "Glad to, I imagine, though," she panted, "I mean I just sort of got the impression that Fritz doesn't want to be a superintendent any more. I imagine they'd sort of thought of coming out to us as a couple——"

David's voice was wistful. "That would have been just about perfect. I bet Fritz would have made a darn good farmer——"

"I bet so, too," Claudia concurred without regret.

They didn't talk very much on the trip home. It was too much effort to raise her voice above the clatter of the train. She had never felt so tired in her life—her head ached and each shoe felt as if it had both feet in it. "I think I'm not used to high heels and wearing a hat," she explained.

They had left the car parked at the station. It was luxurious just to climb in and drive off, with the clear night air against their faces. There was a moon that came through the trees every now and then, and looked at them. It shone on a pond and was was beautiful. "David!" cried Claudia.

"I saw."

The house was lit up. "It looks nice," said Claudia, "sitting there like that."

"It does," said David.

Mrs. Brown met them at the door. She had hot coffee waiting and chocolate cake. "You remind me of Bertha," Claudia told her. "And I mean it for a compliment," she added.

She sank down on the sofa and kicked off her pumps. "Bobby eat his peas? He hates them."

"I mixed them with apple sauce," Mrs. Brown shamelessly admitted, and went on to tell how smart he had been about something or other and that she had sorted all the linens and packed them in three large boxes she had found in the storeroom.

"You did?" Claudia cried incredulously. "That was a huge job, thanks loads!"

"I looked at the cow, too."

David pricked up his ears. "How was she?"

"Nothing doing," said Mrs. Brown.

Claudia giggled. "You sounded just like David when you said that." She yawned and stretched. "Oh, Lord, I'm tired."

Claudia's mother said she didn't wonder. "You've had a hard day behind you, better get to bed."

She fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. It seemed hours later when she awoke. She knew, before she stretched her hand to touch him, that David was no longer by her side. "David!" she called softly. She put on the lamp. He was gone. "David!" she called again.

She threw her robe across her shoulders and fished for her slippers. It was freezing. She hurried to close the windows, and then she saw the light in the barn.

She couldn't help feeling annoyed. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting for him, until her impatience got the better of her.

"The idiot!" she muttered and put on a heavy coat to go to fetch him.

It was black as pitch outside and the wind was bitter. She stumbled twice and a low-hung apple branch, catching her shoulder, caused her to cry out in alarm. The strange inimical blanket of the night pressed down upon her, and made her feel smothered and afraid. Her knees were trembling and her heart pounding when she pushed against the heavy unwieldy barn door and stepped within.

The air was full of warm sweet animal smell, and the kerosene lantern gave out a flickering luminous glow. Louella was not in her stanchion. In a corner on a bed of hay, Claudia saw her standing quietly, with David on his knees beside her.

The sharp words melted from her tongue. He had thrown aside his jacket, and his white pyjama coat, tucked loosely into the belt of his trousers, made him seem young and vulnerable and heart-breakingly intent. "Soo girl, soo girl," he was saying in a low voice, like a croon.

With the creaking of the door, he turned. "Claudia!" He was

glad to see her—not startled or angry as she had half-expected him to be. Not “What are you doing out here?” or “Go back to bed—you’ll catch your death of cold!” No, he acted as if he had expected her to come, as if there were nothing strange in her sudden waking to follow him. “Look!” he said.

At first she could scarcely believe it. “The calf,” she whispered. “Just born.” There was a look on his face that held a great pride.

Claudia could not speak. She had never seen a new-born calf. She had not known that it would be this way. The calf was standing up, soft and damp, its legs freed from the mysterious confines of the womb and ready to move out into living. As she watched it, it took a few wavering steps, and its brown eyes, wide open and darkly fringed—like some great mascaraed beauty, Claudia thought—reached, in unseeing vision, towards its mother’s warmth.

Louella’s great, cavernous face was full of peace and quiet. She bent her head and gave the calf a gentle push, and then she moved away from it.

“She doesn’t want it!” Claudia breathed.

“Yes, she does,” said David, in a low voice. “She wants to make it strong, she wants it to come after her——”

Claudia felt the tears lump in her throat. This, that was happening to her, was her first dazzling revelation of the land. It was almost as if she were being initiated into some profound and cosmic secret—as she had been initiated into loving David, and into having Bobby, and into knowing suddenly and fully that there was God.

David’s voice broke upon her thoughts. “It’s a heifer,” he said. “We’ll raise her and put her out to pasture, and in a couple of years she’ll be giving us her own calf.”

“On,” cried Claudia, suddenly seeing the generous cycle of all life. “How wonderful——” She forgot—and he forgot—that they were going back to New York to live in a hotel.

They didn’t think of it until they were walking hand in hand, a little later, toward the house, looking up into the night

“Funny,” said Claudia, “I didn’t know the stars were out. I’m sure there weren’t any before—or maybe,” she amended honestly, “I was too scared to notice them.”

David was mildly astonished. “You weren’t scared——” he chided.

She had to confess. “I was.”

“Of what, though?” He couldn’t seem to understand it.

“I don’t know. But I’m not any longer. I’d be ashamed to

be. I'm ashamed of almost dying with Bobby. Louella has made me feel terribly shy and inadequate all the way round."

"Louella's a very superior cow," said David.

"She's marvellous," said Claudia. "Are other cows marvellous, too? Or just Louella?"

"They're all pretty swell," admitted David. "Wait till you see how the pigs and the sheep do it——" He stopped. "Maybe we'll buy another place some day," he ended lamely.

She heard the brook tumbling over the rocks and she felt the apple tree gently brush her shoulder as she passed it. "We'll never find another place like this," she said slowly. "Never."

David didn't say anything.

"I wish," she burst out suddenly, "that we were very rich."

"How rich?"

"I wish we had thirty thousand dollars, and could afford to keep Fritz and Bertha as a couple."

David drew to a stop. "What would you do?" he asked in an odd voice.

"I'd buy it back," she said.

Mrs. Brown heard them tiptoe up the steps. "What's the matter?" she called out.

"Are you awake?" asked Claudia needlessly.

Her mother's light went up. They drifted to the threshold.

"What on earth!" Mrs. Brown exclaimed, when she saw them bundled up in coats at that hour of the night.

Claudia solemnly bent to kiss her. "Congratulations, Grandma. It's a girl!"

"You selfish things! Why didn't you call me?"

"Want to go out and see it now?" asked David.

"Certainly," she said, looking almost like Claudia except that her hair was grey. "Lend me your coat, Claudia," she demanded peremptorily.

Claudia was equally peremptory. "Nothing of the kind. You need your beauty sleep. You've a hard day ahead of you."

"What doing?" Mrs. Brown demanded.

"Unpacking all the linens," Claudia pleasantly informed her.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WORLD IS SO FULL

IT was probably the last snowstorm of the season, and Fritz, without being told and looking very expensive in his white coat, laid a fresh fire in the living-room. That was the remarkable part about Fritz—he had a lot of different personalities. When he went out to the movies with Bertha in his baggy brown suit, he looked like an ordinary German husband; when he milked the cows, he looked like a farmer; and when he served the table he looked like a butler. He fooled Julia the Sunday she and Hartley came for dinner. She almost fell over when he opened the door, because he was such a surprise after Claudia's usual sixty-with-wash specimens.

Hartley came right out with it. He said, "Playing the market, lad?"

David admitted that he was, a little, but nothing on margin. Claudia could never remember what margin was—except that once David had been caught on it—but she said. "Don't be silly, Hartley, we're not getting rich, it's only Fritz, our old apartment superintendent from New York."

"Not really!" Julia exclaimed. "I thought he had a wife?"

"He did, but now we've got her," said Claudia.

"Well, I must say you're in luck," said Julia. "He seems to be an excellent servant."

"Oh, he's not a servant," Claudia explained. "Neither of them. I mean we look on them as practically family."

Julia raised her orderly black brows. "Be careful," she advised. "Give them a finger and they'll take a hand."

Claudia was going to deny it, but David stepped on her foot. After they'd gone, he said, "Don't argue with people. Everyone's got his own ideas."

It was really odd, how Fritz and Bertha never took advantage of being treated like friends which, of course, showed they weren't servants. Tonight, as Fritz finished laying the fire, David

said, "Try some of this new tobacco, Fritz, and see how you like it."

Fritz hesitated to light his pipe in the living room, but David said, "Go ahead." While they smoked, David asked him if they oughtn't to hire some day labour on the place to clear out the underbrush beyond the pasture. Fritz was indignant. "Ach," he said, "why spend money for lazy loafers? I soon get plenty time. I do it myself quicker and better. Is fine tobacco, Mr. Naughton. Very good."

"Here's an extra can," said David, tossing it to him.

"Ach," cried Fritz, overwhelmed, and went back to Bertha and the peaceful mystery of their life beyond the kitchen.

"Why should we be so blessed?" sighed Claudia as she fished around in a box of candy for one that wasn't figs or coffee. "Green," she discovered with annoyance.

"I'll take it," said David, who liked the green ones. "That's marzipan, simpleton."

"I detest marzipan. I think I'll comb out Shakespeare's hair balls."

"That's one of your better ones," David observed.

"Better one what?"

"*Non sequiturs.*"

After a prolonged search, she found the cat at the foot of Bobby's crib, where he had absolutely no right to be. "You!" She grabbed him up and tossed him over her shoulder. He hung down, spineless. She knew his ways. He was only playing possum. At any moment he might unsheath his cream-coloured velvet paws and dig his claws in her. "Away with you!" She let him fall to the floor with a soft bounce and clapped him out of the room, waiting to hear his ridiculous one-sided scurry down the stairs, as if an army of enemies was at his heels. No need to keep tabs on him, he'd make a bee-line for the lghed living-room and David.

She lingered a moment to cover Bobby. She put his arms under the blanket, but he flung them up again. He smelled damp and sweet. If she were to walk blindfolded through an immense corridor of babies she'd know which one was Bobby. In the half-light of the hall she saw him smile in his dreams. She bent swiftly and felt the touch of his lips, remote beneath her own. She was ashamed—you should only kiss children on the cheek. But nobody saw her and he was so sweet—so sweet. Her heart felt full.

When she returned to the living-room, David had let the dogs

in, and was settled at his desk with a mountain of papers and cheque books.

Claudia winced. "Just look what they're doing to the carpet—"

"That's all right," said David. "They always slobber when they're happy, and now they're happy to be in here out of the cold, aren't you, pups?"

They thumped their tails in mass agreement. "Oh, well," Claudia surrendered and looked for Shakespeare, who was making himself invisible beneath the sofa. She dragged him out. The Danes continued to rest their huge heads on their paws, but their watchful eyes followed the cat in silent speculation. Claudia settled herself in a straight chair with a comb in one hand and Shakespeare grasped firmly in the other.

David looked up. "I need your vouchers, Claudia. Where are they?"

"Ouch, that hurts me more than it hurts you—'in the pig's eye,' says Shakespeare—the bottom right-hand drawer, dear. Everything balanced nicely this month. What do you want them for?"

"Income tax. You made some charity donations, didn't you?"

"Quite a few, even one to Spain, but that was months ago."

"That's all right as long as it was within the year."

"Oh, it was within the year," Claudia assured him. "I spent a fortune on flowers, too—Helen Drew's thingamajig that went wrong, for one thing, and——"

"The Government's not interested in Helen Drew's thingamajig," David cut in, "although the district attorney might be," he added shortly. He opened the bottom drawer and drew out a thin packet of long, yellow envelopes. He counted them.

"You don't like Helen, do you?"

"I think she's making a damn swell mess of her life."

Claudia grinned. "She thinks I am, too. No lovers and only one husband."

"That's too bad. There's only November and December here. Where's the rest?"

"Torn up. I never keep vouchers after two months," she informed him virtuously.

David's voice rose to a roar. "My God, you're supposed to keep them for three years!"

"Oh, David, don't be silly. I wouldn't even have clothes hanging around for three years!"

David laid down his pencil. "Listen, Claudia. Didn't I explain to you that, aside from other reasons, you need your vouchers for income tax?"

"I don't know. Maybe you did. But people who take income taxes so seriously make me sick. Why don't you ignore the whole thing for once and see what happens?"

"Is that what you'd do if I weren't here?"

"Certainly."

"And how'd you like to go to jail?"

"How grown men can be so scared of a little tax," she marvelled.

"It doesn't happen to be so little this year," David informed her with mingled emotions. "We'll probably be paying in the neighbourhood of seven hundred."

"Seven hundred dollars!" Claudia was aghast. "I wouldn't do it," she advised him flatly.

"Put the cat down and come over here."

"I'm almost finished. Wait a minute."

"No, now." He rose and tipped her off her chair. Shakespeare vanished with alacrity. David drew the chair up to his desk.

She could see that he meant business, so she sat down.

A great sleepiness overwhelmed her. She yawned in her throat. David glanced at her. "Pay attention," he commanded. "It's time you learned a few things."

"I understand about mortgages now," she murmured.

"Good. We'll start from there. We can deduct the interest on our mortgage from our gross return——"

"Oh, I see," she interrupted brightly. "Have we any other deductions?"

"Bobby, of course. You can take off four hundred dollars a child——"

"Four hundred dollars!" she echoed. "Why, that's insulting. His tonsils alone cost almost half that much!"

"When he's nineteen they won't allow you anything," said David grimly.

She was outraged. "Ridiculous, I never heard of such a thing! Oh, David," she broke off, staring out of the window. "The moon!"

"Never mind the moon."

"But you must look," she urged tremulously. "It's beautiful with the snow. A new moon, too. Make a wish."

"I wish you weren't so dumb," he acceded promptly.

She closed her eyes as if she hadn't heard him. "I wish," she whispered, "that life would never be any less wonderful than it is right now."

He put his arm around her. "Happy?" His voice was a whisper, too.

"Terribly."

They found themselves on their feet, looking out of the window. David moved away from her and switched the room into darkness. Then he was beside her again. "It is beautiful," he breathed.

"The apple tree——"

He nodded.

"It's more beautiful in winter than in summer."

"Much. Glad we didn't sell the place?"

She was speechless with being glad. "Don't do income tax tonight," she begged in a low voice.

"I ought to——"

"Please——"

The Danes stirred and sighed out heavily. David put the light up and swept all the papers into a pile, and then swept the pile into the top drawer. Shakespeare hung around the door. Claudia swooped him up. "Oh," she cried, "the world is so full of a number of things——"

"The world is full of two kinds of people," interrupted David. "Those who quote *Alice in Wonderland*, and those who don't."

"Smarty, it isn't *Alice in Wonderland*, it's Tennyson. Anyway, we should be."

"What?"

"Happy as kings."

"I'm as happy as a king," he told her simply.

"Are you really, David?"

"A lot happier," he said.

He had a one-track mind, however. He said afterwards, before they fell asleep, "Seriously, Claudia, you ought to begin to know about things like taxes and stocks and annuities. Suppose I died?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "David, stop it!"

"No, but suppose I did. What would you do? You'd have thirty thousand insurance, a handful of stocks, and this place——"

She gasped. "David, I'd be a millionaire!"

"Don't fool yourself. Properly invested it might give you about two thousand dollars income a year, and that's all. You'll probably have to take a job."

"Nonsense. It's loads. I wouldn't invest the money, you see. I'd use it. Slowly, of course. If I used three or four thousand a year, for instance, I could live an awfully long time before it would all be gone."

"I'm going to make a new will!" he shouted. "I'm going to leave everything in trust!"

"Shhh—you'll wake Bobby. What's trust?"

"A trust fund is for jackass women. You'd get so much a month, and that's all. Then I wouldn't have to hold my breath for fear you'd do something crazy."

"You wouldn't have any breath to hold," she reminded him practically, "if you were dead."

If you were dead. The words came back to her in the darkness. She clung to him.

"Oh, David, I hate talking of wills. I won't listen." Her heart thumped out against his breast in panic.

"Silly——" he chided her. "How can you be so silly——"

"I'm not silly," she said in a muffled voice. "You don't understand—I couldn't live if anything ever happened to you."

"You'd live," he stated starkly. "You'd damn well have to live."

"I wouldn't," she averred rebelliously. "I'd kill myself."

"What about Bobby?"

"Bobby wouldn't matter——"

"Oh, yes, he would. He'd matter more than anything else."

"David, please——" Her voice broke.

His fingers touched her cheek. "Why, Claudia, you're crying."

"Oh, David. Hold me tight."

He held her close. "You little fool, you little fool——" he whispered.

She cried and cried. She couldn't seem to stop. He was full of wonder and concern, because she so rarely gave in to crying. "Darling, what's the matter? Tell me——"

It was impossible to explain. The new moon, the snow, the dusky smell of burning logs—the whole evening had throbbled with some sweet haunting anguish of the soul. The word came to her. Nostalgia—for something that was hers and seemed already passed.

In the morning when she wakened she knew as soon as she opened her eyes that the feeling had stayed with her. Quiet and heavy, it had slept within her heart all night.

"David——"

"What, darling?"

"Nothing."

"Wives have been murdered for less than that," he mentioned.

"I know what I meant to ask you. What train tonight?"

"The 5.40 as usual. Unless something turns up. What do you want to know for?"

"No reason. I love you, that's all."

"Search me why," said David humbly. "God, smell Bertha's coffee, will you?"

"Did you ever see anyone fry bacon so gorgeously, either?"

"Never."

She brought Bobby in to see him while he shaved. "Company," she announced, tapping on the door.

Hurriedly she swung him to the floor, so that he looked as if he had walked all the way from the nursery, barefoot and in his brief underwear, with his fat knees knocking. He had almost all his teeth, and when he smiled they looked like the pearly little kernels of new corn.

"Look at that belly! Will he outgrow it?" David demanded in alarm.

"Of course he'll outgrow it. I hope not too soon, though. I adore it."

"Don't," David cautioned her sternly, "make a sissy out of him." He dabbed Bobby's cheeks and nose with shaving soap. "Now you're a big man," he said.

"Two below zero at the barn," Fritz proudly announced downstairs.

"The house is warm as toast," said Claudia.

"We couldn't have a better heating system," David remarked with satisfaction.

Claudia laughed. "We sound crazy to listen to us. We seem to like everything about us and everything we have."

"Why not?" said David. "We'd be crazy if we didn't."

Fritz brought the car around to the front. "Oh," said David, as he kissed Claudia at the door. "I forgot to tell you. I'm leaving it at the station garage for greasing and the boy'll bring it back."

"Good. I won't need it this morning, anyway."

He kissed her hard and gave her a whack. "Go in now, you'll freeze--"

She pretended to close the door, but as soon as he was down the path she opened it again and stood hugging her shoulders in the cold wind and making faces at him while he bent to release the brake.

"He looks nice in a car," she thought. His clean handsome profile and his Homburg hat inflated it into quite a handsome vehicle. But when Claudia went marketing in it, with both dogs

drooling down her back from the rear seat, and vegetable bags and grocery boxes piled up against the windows, it looked like just what it was—a thoroughly undistinguished grey sedan for family use.

David had bought it second-hand at a local dealer's. It needed a new paint job, but it had a honey of a motor, David said, and it would do nicely until they could afford to buy a station wagon. "He drives it like a million dollars," she admitted, as she waited for him to glide noiselessly into second gear and vanish down the snow-covered country road. She wouldn't have told him to his face, for anything. They fought quite a lot about driving.

"Stay on the right-hand side of the road!" he'd boom at her.

"I am!" she'd shout back.

"You're not!"

In the end she'd usually give the wheel over to him and say with frigid detachment. "Here. You're so marvellous. You drive."

He'd never hesitate to slide into her place, relieved. "God must have a special department," he once said, "that takes care of imbeciles and women."

Everything about a woman driver irritated him—the way she'd put out her hand for signals, the way she'd speed up as soon as you wanted to pass her. "Damn fool female," he'd glower, and toot her into submission. Secretly, Claudia despised women drivers, too. She'd hardly ever seen a woman back into a small parking space the way a man could. She had managed to do it beautifully, just once, but she couldn't seem to be able to find the trick of it again. More often than not, she'd discover herself three feet from the kerb in a conspicuous slant, standing out from the rest of the cars like one of Fritz's teeth.

Fritz said now, at her shoulder. "The roads are mighty slippery. It's better you don't drive today and let me go down to the train for Mr. David tonight."

"We'll see," she said. Fat chance, she thought to herself. She'd never missed a single trip calling for him. It was endlessly an adventure—the blessed crowning of her sweetly uneventful days. She thought suddenly, "I wish it were evening already." Unaccountably that strange sensation of vague uncertainty stole back over her once more. She turned into the house. "I'll do my bureau drawers," she resolved. They needed doing. They'd been hanging over her head for days.

As she was going over her things she came upon two particularly nice nightgowns, reserved for being sick in bed. "What's the use of saving them? I'm too healthy," she decided. "I'll put

one of them on tonight." She chose the white satin, with the ecru lace.

There was the sudden sound of wheels outside and the sharp screech of brakes. She hurried to the window; callers were rare on a winter morning in the country. But it wasn't a caller; it was one of the neighbouring farmers, and Fritz had stopped shovelling snow and was talking to him. They both seemed very excited and then Fritz dropped the shovel and ran as fast as he could towards the kitchen.

Claudia went back to sorting her stockings. She heard the slam of the car door and the scrunch of wheels into the snow as the farmer veered violently around, and drove off again. She wondered why he had come and what had made Fritz drop his shovel. . .

His step sounded on the stairs. He stood on the threshold, with Bertha behind him.

"Mrs. Naughton——"

She did not have to look at him to know. The way he said her name was enough. It was like a knell. She would always remember it. It would come back to her all through her life—a voice, out of nowhere, compelling in its challenge. She would either rise to it, or fail to rise.

Her lips moved. "What is it, Fritz?"

"An accident to Mr. David's car. I'm going in the truck——"

Bertha's arm was around her. Bertha was strong. Her fingers were a vice on Claudia's wrist. Fritz and Bertha were both strong people. But they didn't know the truth about it. They didn't know that Claudia had sobbed goodbye against David's breast last night. This, that had just happened, was merely late in happening. She had lived through it all in one brief moment of anguish the night before. That was why she could say, quite steadily, "I'll go with you, Fritz."

"No, no!" Bertha cried out. "Better you stay here with me——"

"I'm all right," said Claudia.

"Then come," Fritz told her, and drew his jacket across her shoulders.

The truck, which was brand new, already smelled of manure. "A farm truck ought to smell of manure," David had said.

Climbing into the front seat, she missed him. He was always with her whenever anything happened—even a little thing, like the time she'd been smart-alecky, and picked up a field rat and it turned and bit her. David, for no good reason that she could see, had rushed her down to Dr. Barry in the village, who

looked at the wound and said in his Yankee drawl that it didn't amount to much, but it was certainly better not to take any chances with a rat and maybe a tetanus injection wasn't such a bad idea. "That husband of yours should have been a doctor," he'd told Claudia, and Claudia had replied proudly that he'd always wanted to be. That was probably why he was so good in emergencies. He never got excited when Bobby choked on his food, or ran up a temperature. He wouldn't even lose his head now, Claudia thought. Thinking of him, was almost like having him with her—until they came to where the accident had happened.

"Don't look, Mrs. Naughton."

But she had already seen the grey sedan, battered up against a stone wall and a smaller car beside it overturned like a broken toy. A few farm people, gathered about, stared after them. Fritz, with white lips, pressed his foot to the floorboard and the truck shot ahead.

Claudia's body fought out in shock, as if a blanketing anaesthesia had dropped abruptly from her. She had to reach for breath above the pounding of her heart, and her eyes closed against the roar in her ears. The car slowed and stopped. "Are you all right?" Fritz asked.

"No," she gasped. A thin scream broke loose from her. "There, there," said Fritz. He put his arm around her.

She gritted her teeth. "I mustn't let go, he wouldn't want me to."

"I think," said Fritz gently, "he would want you to cry a little. It is a great and terrible thing that has happened to us, Mrs. Naughton." His voice deepened. He was a little like God, the way he said, "A great and terrible thing has happened."

The plumber rumbled past in his clanking car. "Nasty smash-up, somebody killed!" he called out importantly. Then he recognised Fritz and pulled up sharply. He didn't see Claudia, huddled up in the heavy jacket.

"Be quiet!" Fritz told him sternly. He started the car and they drove on.

"Don't let me break down again, Fritz," Claudia whispered, "He wouldn't like it, really."

She remembered how he had spoken last night. He must have known, he must have felt what was coming. "I couldn't live if anything ever happened to you." What a child she'd been, unready to grow up, unready to face life. He knew that, too. He'd always known it. But now life had caught up with her. David had tried to warn her. "You'd live," he had said. "You'd

damn well have to." Yes, she was living—something had happened to David and she was living. In a blinding flash she saw all of life stretched out before her—without him. There would be new moons and new snows, and sunlight and rain. And David wouldn't be there. "You have your child," people would say. True. She'd have Bobby. "*Don't make a sissy out of Bobby!*" Again it was as if he were beside her. He lay in Dr. Barry's office, but strangely he was here with her, as close as he had ever been in all their life together. "And me such a careful willy at the wheel——" she heard his rueful comment.

"Fritz," she said brokenly. "I don't understand. Mr. Naughton always drove so carefully——"

Fritz's face was severe. "The other man was drunk. George Mason. A no-good. Drunk. They smelled liquor on him when they picked him up——"

"Oh," said Claudia. "It wasn't your fault, David darling." She couldn't help smiling. "David, we can keep right on talking together—— But, David, don't leave me to pay that income tax!" She began to laugh. "Oh, Fritz, help me, help me——"

"Now, now——"

"No, don't stop the car. Drive quickly. Get there, Fritz." She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. "David, don't let me think—David, keep me from thinking!"

They turned into the village street. There was a big crowd gathered around the doctor's house. Two policemen were trying to keep order. A little murmur of pity rose up as Fritz led Claudia through the gate.

The doctor's wife opened the door. Claudia had met her at the church fair. She had introduced herself, "I'm Doctor's wife."

"The doctor's wife," Claudia had told David later, "looks the image of Mrs. Roosevelt."

Now Mrs. Barry stretched out her arms to Claudia. "Oh, poor child, its terrible——"

Claudia thought how different it had sounded when Fritz had said "A great and terrible thing has happened to us." Fritz, somehow, lifted one up to the dignity of pain, but Mrs. Barry seemed to pull one down to the indignity of suffering. "Let me get you something," she begged.

"Thank you, I'm all right," said Claudia.

The waiting-room was strangely empty, with all the restless, curious crowd outside. Beyond the closed door to the office there was silence and the thin, sharp smell of antiseptic. ("David, where are you? David! Please walk through that door, please come to me, and put your arms around me!")

A bell pealed through the house—shrill and imperative, like a doctor's bell ought to be. Mrs. Barry hurried to the door.

A woman's voice screamed, "Where is he? Where is he? Take me to him!" Then a man's voice said, "Shhh!"

The man wore no tie and needed a shave. He came into the room, half carrying the woman who was screaming. "She's the other wife," thought Claudia. She felt sorry for the woman, not because of what had happened to her husband, but because she was screaming about it. "I screamed like that last night," thought Claudia, "inside myself." She wanted to tell the woman that it happened to you whether you screamed or not. "Take it," she felt like saying, "because there isn't anything else you can do."

The woman had fallen on the sofa. She was rocking back and forth and moaning. She wore a long coat over a kimono and she had not yet combed her hair out of the tight curls in which she'd slept. Her face was swollen and puffed, and somehow naked without the make-up which it needed. To look at her made Claudia realise that it was early — scarcely nine o'clock. David was to have caught the 8.14. At this moment he would have been half-way to the office. "*Mr. Naughton calling.*" No sweet and senseless extravagance of telephone calls from that office ever again. "*Not a thing. Just wanted to know if you'd be at home this evening in case I dropped in—*"

The other woman was talking to her. "Is it your husband?"

"Yes," said Claudia.

"The two of us in the same boat," said the woman. "It's terrible, isn't it? Any kids?"

"One," said Claudia.

"Not me," said the woman with a kind of bitter triumph. "You just bought the place up on the River Road, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Claudia. "A year ago."

"I guess it's another of those things. You buy a place and then you have to let it go," said the woman almost angrily. "We just bought a place, too."

Claudia thought, "I'll keep the farm for Bobby." How strange! She had said last night, "Bobby won't matter." And David had answered, "Oh, yes he will. He'll matter more than anything else." She supposed it would be hard not to run away from the poignant heart-aches of remembering each small delight that they had shared, but if she could live through this hour she could live through whatever had to be. David had been right in that, too.

Her mind plunged on, clear and detached from the agony of her soul. Perhaps her mother would come and live with her.

Her mother. It was the first time Claudia had thought of her. How could she break it to her? "David was killed this morning." It would be bitterly hard. Her mother would know her own grief, for she loved David, and Claudia's grief, for Claudia was her baby. "I must not be a baby any longer," Claudia thought. She was full-grown, she could take her place among the regiment of women who had loved and lost. Her mother was one of that regiment. She, too, had been left a widow—she had even faced childbirth by herself. Claudia had never realised what that had meant. She had accepted without question her mother's cheerful competence, and if at times she had weakened to sentimental memories, Claudia had been intolerant and a little condescending. "Forgive me, I have known so little." It was like a prayer rising up within her and offered humbly to those who belonged to the vast nobility of loneliness.

She saw Fritz rise. He came to her and stood beside her, his hand steady on her shoulder. The door of the doctor's office swung open. The doctor came out and closed the door behind him. The other woman rose from the sofa with a cry. "Doctor!" She flung herself upon him. "Is he dead, Doctor, is he dead?"

The doctor didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He just bent his head a little, and the look on his face was tired and old. "Take her home," he said to the man who needed a shave.

"Come on, Lottie. Pull yourself together."

The doctor moved to Claudia. Claudia looked at him. "You can tell me," she said. "I'm not afraid."

He smiled and his face was suddenly kind and young. "There isn't anything to be afraid of," he said. "Your husband's going to be all right. He's still unconscious—a broken collarbone and a slight concussion, but he'll pull out of it in a little while."

Claudia tried to thank him, but he wavered and disappeared into a swirling blackness, and when the blackness cleared, the doctor's wife was bending over her. "Doctor wants you to drink this," she was saying.

"I'm ashamed," said Claudia. "I didn't mean to——"

"You were perfectly wonderful," said the doctor's wife. "I declare I never saw anyone take anything so wonderfully. I'm sure if it had been Doctor lying in there——" Mrs. Barry shuddered. She couldn't face the thought of it.

"You'd have stood it," Claudia told her simply. "I know you would have." She remembered suddenly the other woman who had gone home to an empty house. The tears came to her eyes. "Think of Mrs. Mason," she said.

Mrs. Barry set her lips and her soft face hardened. "I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on the likes of her," she remarked.

"But her husband's dead!" cried Claudia in pity. "She'll never see him any more."

"Small loss for either of them," said Mrs. Barry grimly. "It's public property in the town the way they carried on and then her coming in here with that man, and screaming just as if she meant it——"

Claudia looked at the doctor's wife. She had never given up what she most loved, and so she didn't understand. She didn't even understand the other woman—who had never loved.

"She had to scream," said Claudia slowly. "She missed so much—poor thing."

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMER THEATRE—SOME ARE NOT

MRS. Riddle, who was buying the weekly special of a rump of veal, stopped long enough to say, "How do you do, my dear?"

"How do you do," said Claudia. "I'll have a steak, please, Eddie." David loved steak and so did Bobby. Claudia thought how lovely it would be to have a lot of money and have steak and clean sheets every day in the week. It was funny. The Riddles had a lot of money—indeed, they were the richest people in Eastbrook, with a huge stone house full of terraces—and yet they ate veal only on special occasions, and Mrs. Riddle was worrying about the butcher not trimming it enough before it was weighed. "Maybe," thought Claudia, "that's why they're rich!"

Eddie cut off a handsome porterhouse. "That's a 'beaut'," he said, shaping it with the edge of his knife.

"Stunning!" Claudia agreed. "Do you think you could possibly spare some bones for the dogs?"

Eddie was wonderful with bones. More often than not Bertha would go into ecstasies over them and make a perfectly delicious soup for the family before giving them to Bluff and Bluster. Claudia could never decide whether this was strictly honest or not, but she supposed it was just as honest as Mrs. Riddle bullying the butcher into trimming all of the fat off. Women, she decided, had little streaks of dishonesty running through them, like bits of gristle that ran through even the finest tenderloin.

"Those are very nice bones, Henry," Mrs. Riddle remarked, looking a little enviously at the huge stack that Eddie was wrapping up for Claudia.

Mrs. Riddle's man said that he would give her some too, and disappeared into the ice-chest. He came back with a few little splinters that almost made Claudia laugh. But Mrs. Riddle couldn't say a word because everyone in the store knew that she only had Scotties, whereas Claudia had Great Danes. It was enough to make Mrs. Riddle feel sour towards Claudia, so it was

a surprise when she paused on her way out and inquired about David's health.

"Such a terrible accident. We heard about it from Julia and Hartley. Has he quite recovered?"

"Oh, yes," said Claudia, reaching surreptitiously for the under part of the counter to knock wood.

"No ill effects at all?" Mrs. Riddle seemed a little put out to think that anyone could have come so near death and have nothing to show for it, as it were.

"None at all," said Claudia firmly. She almost added that God had been simply marvellous to them, but Mrs. Riddle probably wouldn't have understood. Anyway, Mrs. Riddle lost interest in the accident once she heard that David was recovered, and said weren't the flies dreadful for that time of year, and would Claudia and David come for dinner the following Saturday night?

"Why, we'd love to," Claudia accepted. "That's awfully nice."

"So nice to have you," said Mrs. Riddle. "We dine at eight."

Claudia expected David to make a fuss about going, and he did. He knew the Riddles, who were very old friends of Hartley's, but he didn't find them any more stimulating than he found Hartley. When Mrs. Riddle asked him to design a play wing for her—also with terraces—he refused. He said he was busy with the college buildings, and anyway, he didn't want to be that kind of an architect. Julia heard about it, of course, and told him that he was a pig-headed fool to turn down such an important contact, especially in a small community like Eastbrook.

"Julia's right," Hartley agreed in his mild way, but David said, "The hell with the Riddles!"

It was practically the same thing when Claudia told him about the invitation. "If it's eight o'clock dinner it means a boiled shirt, and I'll be damned if I'll do it."

Claudia was silent for a long moment before she spoke. Then she said with slow deliberation. "David, does it ever occur to you that I might enjoy going to a party for a change?"

He looked as though he'd been robbed. "I thought you didn't like parties," he rejoined accusingly, with his lower lip jutting out like Bobby's. "I married you because you didn't."

"I quite realise that," she replied. "But even though it destroys your ideal of me, I'd like to go out just once more before my teeth fall out and my hair turns white."

"Oh, all right, all right," he conceded, grumbling. His tone changed all at once. "Look here," he asked her seriously, "you're not bored or anything, are you?"

"Oh, don't be silly! How can you be bored when you're in love?"

"Who're you in love with?" His voice took on that husky note that always sent shivers down her back, even after four years.

"A lovely young feller," she said, "who's just crazy to take me to the Riddles' party."

David looked blank. "I never met the guy," said he.

"Shall I wear my yellow or my yellow?" Claudia asked her mother on the evening of the dinner.

"I'd wear my yellow if I were you," said Mrs. Brown, who was spending the week-end with them.

Claudia drew the yellow from the closet and held it up against her. "Does it show its age? It's two years—my God, what am I talking about?—three years old next winter."

"Haven't you anything else to wear?"

"Oh yes," said Claudia cheerfully. "I could either wear the new cream separator or the chicken-house."

"Very becoming. Just buy it?" David queried affably when he saw her dressed.

"Yesterday. Didn't you know?"

He was full of approval, with her scathing irony completely lost upon him. "You're beautiful, darling."

"Beautiful, but not sexy," she decided gloomily as she stood regarding herself in the mirror.

"What do you mean, sexy?" he demanded, prancing into his trousers.

"You know—dangerous. The trouble is, I look too damn happily married. It sticks out all over me." She caught his reflection in the glass. Not since they had bought the farm had she seen him in his dinner-jacket. The immaculate black and whiteness of him gave her the sweet shock of being in the room with a handsome stranger. "Marriage doesn't stick out all over you at all," she rebelled. "You look positively single."

David slipped his finger between his slim waistline and his belt. "An inch to spare," he admitted smugly. He came up behind her and put his arms around her, his chin resting on her head. "Listen," he beguiled, "how about a lobster dinner at the Point and a movie afterwards?"

If he were asking her to turn her back on a violin recital, or an art exhibit, she'd have gone the whole way with him and gladly. But this was different. "David," she said, "we're going to the Riddles' party, so stop trying to get out of it."

Afterwards she would have given anything if she had taken him up on his idea. In the first place, nobody was dressed in yellow except Mrs. Riddle's four maids, whose uniforms were the identical shade of Claudia's gown. It couldn't help but cramp what little style she had. "Your dress is the longest anyway," whispered David consolingly.

Aside from the dress, however, one look at the crowds milling about on the spacious Riddle terraces told her that she was not going to have a good time. There seemed to be hundreds of people, all middle-aged around their waists and full of diamonds.

"I could murder you," muttered David in her ear.

"I could murder myself," she muttered back. "But do you see what I see?"

David followed her gaze to an enormous buffet table set beneath canopy in the middle of a sunken garden. Whatever economies Mrs. Riddle practised in the privacy of her personal chain store were certainly not in evidence in the display of catered masterpieces and out-of-season delicacies. Claudia and David drifted towards it, trying not to seem in too much of a hurry. A number of guests turned to look at them, but nobody hindered their progress except Mr. Riddle, who didn't really recognise them, but who asked them genially if they had met everybody.

"Oh, yes," said Claudia, smiling.

"Sure, I've met a swell dame," said David under his breath. "Madam, will you sleep with me tonight?"

Claudia lowered her eyes in embarrassment. "I'll ask my mother, sir. Why do I feel sorry for poor little Mr. Riddle?" she digressed.

"Because his wife wears the pants."

"Oh, David," she digressed again. "Look! Can that be solid caviare?" She nodded towards a huge glass bowl heaped to the brim with succulent black bullets. David's knowing eye appraised it. "Solid," he affirmed. He lost no time. "Onion?"

"What a stupid question. Very little chopped egg, though, I can get eggs home. What gives caviare?"

"Sturgeon."

"Why don't we raise some sturgeons, then? I mean with all our lovely pasture land, why not?"

"No reason at all," said David.

They were having just as good a time as if they were home with the dogs. "Let's eat the whole bowl up and then leave," suggested David shamelessly.

"Let's."

Then Mrs. Riddle approached, looking like a picture from the

New Yorker in her flowing chiffon gown. She bore with her a guest—a late-comer, in a grey flannel tailored suit and grey slouch hat. In the uncertain lighting of the garden it was impossible to see her face clearly, but Claudia knew she must be beautiful, and young, and somebody.

"Oh, Nancy, darling, what divine food!"

It was a deep, husky voice—much more English than a real English person. Claudia did not have to wait for "Nancy darling" (who was, surprisingly, Mrs. Riddle) to announce the presence of Victoria Manners. Claudia put her plate down. Her heart thumped. The present fell away—and with it David and Bobby—and she was carried back to dramatic school and windy Saturdays, waiting outside of stage entrances. She'd thought it was all out of her system years ago, but here she was as bad as ever, with palpitation and cold hands. "Oh, Miss Manners!" she breathed. But nobody heard her. Miss Manners had eyes only for David, and Mrs. Riddle was playfully adjuring him to take care of poor dear Tory, who'd had a late rehearsal and was famished.

"I'll do my best," said David. "Caviare?"

"I adore caviare."

"Onion?"

"Now really. Mr. Naughton, what's caviare without onion?"

Claudia watched David walk about the table, filling poor, dear Tory's plate. There was something just a little too pat about the whole thing. Miss Manners had probably lost no time in sizing up the party, and had seen in David the only young and handsome male in the entire assemblage of paunches and cigars. "Lead me over to him, Nancy darling——" And Mrs. Riddle had obediently led her over."

"Listen, poor-dear-Tory," Claudia informed her silently, "go pick out somebody else; this gentleman is taken."

Miss Manners, however, was insensitive to thought waves. She kept on powdering her perfect nose and squinting at her perfect face in the mirror of her compact. Claudia's resentment vanished in honest admiration.

"I never miss a play of yours, Miss Manners. I love your work——" she offered shyly.

Miss Manners looked up and around. It took her a moment to register that it was Claudia who had spoken, and another moment to realise that Claudia was not one of the waitresses-in-yellow.

"Oh, how sweet of you," she murmured. "How terribly sweet," and returned to her compact.

"I'm practically snubbed," thought Claudia, flushing.

David came back, bearing a laden plate. Miss Manners snapped her compact to and thrust it in her purse. She looked up and laughed, pouring out at him the full battery of her charm. "Amazing man! Where can we find a nice secluded spot where I can gobble to my heart's content?"

"I don't know," he admitted helplessly. "Where would you think, Claudia?"

"I don't know," said Claudia, feeling gauche and in the way.

Victoria Manners looked at her for the first time.

"You've met my wife, haven't you?" David quickly asked.

Claudia saw a swift change come over Tory's face. "Oh!" she said. Then she took Claudia's hand and held it for a long moment in both her own and, in that moment, Claudia had a feeling that she was absorbing everything there was to know—that Claudia and David were very much in love, and that there had never been another woman or another man.

"You darling," said Victoria at last. She turned to David and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "The child's a lamb," she told him softly.

David smiled, but Claudia boiled. A lamb was just about the worst thing that a self-respecting woman could be. Tory Manners knew it perfectly well, only she made David believe it was something very special and extra. Claudia stiffened for battle. But there was nothing she could do about it, so it was fortunate that Mr. Riddle appeared at that instant, clapping his hands like an overgrown kindergarten child, and summoning everyone to the swimming pool for fireworks.

"Oh, what fun!" cried Tory Manners. "Don't you adore fireworks?" she appealed to Claudia.

"If they don't make a bang," Claudia specified.

In the soft crush of people pushing downward toward an impromptu grandstand, she found herself separated from David. A plump grey-haired man, who wheezed, caught at her arm to balance himself as he stumbled over a flagstone.

"Sorry, little lady——"

Little lady! Little lamb! Claudia gritted her teeth and let her gaze run out across the crowds of guests fumbling about for seats. On the dim blot of silks and satins it was easy to pick out a grey tailored suit—and there, quite close to the suit, was David. Claudia waved to him, but he was looking in the opposite direction, wondering, doubtlessly, what had happened to her. Then Tory sat down and David, still craning his neck, sat down beside her.

"Shall we take these seats, little lady?" The grey-haired man

was wheezing more than ever, but he was very nice and fatherly, and Claudia was grateful to him. It was better than sitting by herself.

"That's Victoria Manners in the grey suit," he informed her kindly, wanting to show her a good time.

"Are you telling me?" Claudia inwardly retorted.

"Humph. Good-looking fellow with her. Never saw him before. Wonder who he is?"

"He's my husband," Claudia said.

Later, driving home through the warm, fragrant night, David had the nerve to ask her who her boy-friend was and whether she'd had a good time.

She wanted to kick his shins, but instead she said, "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Have a good time."

"Not bad," he answered amiably.

It was a shock. Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. Then it leaped up again into her throat. She wanted to yell and scream. She wanted to bang her fist through the car window and bite the upholstery. But she sat very still and didn't say a word. "My God," she thought, "I'm jealous."

She was aware that he had spoken again. She forced her lips to move. "What did you say?"

He didn't answer immediately. He was driving slowly, lighting a cigarette. The flickering glow of the match showed his profile, strong and clean and handsome. A woman would be a fool not to fall in love with him, thought Claudia miserably, and a man would be a fool not to fall in love with someone as beautiful and as famous as Victoria Manners. Up to now she had thought that such things only happen in fiction, but fiction evidently got its ideas from real life.

David tossed the match out and stepped on the gas. "I said you ought to say, 'Thank you, dear David'."

"Thank you, dear David, for what?" ("I could joyfully wring your neck!")

"I found out a lot of dope for you." He had a complacent air about him. "Tory Manners is trying out a new play a week from Monday at the Redbury summer theatre."

"It's been in the window of the butcher's shop for days," Claudia witheringly remarked.

"You never told me."

"Why should I, pray? You loathe summer theatres. Or, rather, you did," she couldn't resist adding.

"Yes, I know, but this is different. How'd you like to go to a rehearsal?"

Rehearsal. Magic word. She quivered. "What do you mean, rehearsal?" she asked guardedly.

"You're invited."

"Me—or you?"

The implication escaped him "Both of us. I told her all about you."

"Who, all about me?"

"This Manners dame, of course." (She breathed deep. She couldn't have borne it if he had said "Tory.") "I told her you'd studied for the stage and the first time I saw you was at a performance of——" he went blank.

"*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*," she supplied smoothly. "That must have thrilled her."

"Thrilled who?"

"The great Victoria."

"She was damned nice about it. She said you ought to get a big kick out of having a summer theatre so near by—that is, if you could get in with the bunch that runs it."

Claudia said nothing. She was torn with conflict. In the past week she'd driven over to Redbury twice, just to pass the new playhouse, and each time the thought had come to her, "If only I knew someone connected with it." It wasn't as if she were rushed to death the way she used to be. Since Bertha and Fritz were household fixtures, responsibility had simply been lifted from her shoulders. They ran the whole place, inside and out and were marvellous. "God bless our treasures," she and David would say, when something nice would happen, like Fritz pressing David's suits without being asked, or Bertha canning surplus peas for winter. Also, Bobby was going on 'three, with all his teeth and mumps on both sides behind him, which meant he was practically a human being and not a baby any longer.

"Oh, please——" Claudia would pray, reflecting with panic that she herself was an only child and maybe it was hereditary. She'd questioned her mother, but Mrs. Brown had pooh-poohed the idea. "You can't hurry Nature," she said.

"But Nature doesn't realise I'm getting old," Claudia had fumed. "I'm twenty-two already. I'm way behind my schedule—two girls and two boys before I'm twenty-five."

"Oh, yeah?" David had interceded. "Just hold your horses, kindly."

"It's easy for you to talk," she retorted. "You don't have to sit and wait around for Nature. You go to town every day—

you have your profession and lots of stimulating contacts."

Earlier in the evening he had asked her if she were bored. He was smart. He could usually tell a thing before she knew it herself. Yes, she was bored. Bored with herself and bored with nothing happening. That was why she had wanted to go to the Riddles' party. Perhaps she was meant to go, perhaps it was Fate, for there was no telling where an introduction to the inner circle of the Redbury Players might lead. After attending one rehearsal, she could probably go to all of them. They might even let her hold the prompt script, or sell tickets behind the window—she'd do anything just so long as she could breathe the air of theatre.

"Oh, David," she admitted, "I'd get an awful kick out of it, I really would."

"I thought you would," he said.

"Tory's beautiful, isn't she?" she offered generously.

"Nice eyes," said David. "Why don't you blow yourself to a grey suit?" he added as an afterthought.

She made no answer. He glanced at her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she replied in a small, stifled voice. She was having another attack of jealousy and trying to get over it. It was hard to tell at that point whether Fate was all on her side, or was being two-faced.

If anyone had told her what Fate was really up to, she wouldn't have believed. Fate was certainly a faster worker than Nature. Nature would have years—generations, perhaps—to do what Fate did inside of a couple of hours. When Claudia tiptoed into the theatre with David the following evening at eight o'clock, she was nothing more than a nervous little nobody, all eyes and ears. When she walked out of the Playhouse at ten o'clock, she was twice as nervous, but she was an actress. "Oh, David," she quavered, "pinch me, I'm dreaming!"

"I'm busy pinching myself," said David.

"Do you think I can put it over?"

"Sure you can put it over," he assured her stoutly.

She knew this much: if Tory Manners had the vaguest notion that she, Claudia Naughton, was going to be anything but a terrific flop, she'd never in all the world have asked her to read the part of Betsy.

David didn't know that, of course, he didn't even realise that Tory was all set to have an affair with him. He just thought that it was very decent of her to give Claudia a break, in spite of

the author and the director almost having a fit about it.

Claudia felt sorry for the author, especially. He seemed quite young—very thin and white, with long straight blond hair and no shape to the back of his head. He had evidently had chicken-pox when little and his mother hadn't told him not to scratch. "Oh, my God, Tory," he cried out in a high tragic voice. "You can't do this to me!" Claudia didn't hear the rest of it, because Tory walked him off, with her arm around his shoulder.

The next thing that had happened was the director had his arm around the author's shoulder. The director was swarthy, like the Italian vegetable man on her old corner. He had upstanding black hair which he kept combing with his fingers and a booming voice with hardly any accent. "Listen, Freddie, you got to face it," he told the author with a lot of motions. "Tory's just as apt to walk out on us as not, and where'll that land us?"

Then Claudia sought out Tory. "Miss Manners, I'd better not try it. I know I read the part very badly, much worse than the understudy——"

Tory gave her the sweetest smile. "Darling," she said, "You're going to be divine. I mean you really are, darling. You're perfect!"

"But nobody wants me to play it but you. I can't do it under those circumstances."

Victoria gave a very small, very slow little smile. "Oh, yes, you can, because, you see, I happen to be the only one that counts around here," she said.

It was true. The author vanished into the men's room, and the director sighed and handed Claudia a script. "Read it through. Get the gist of it. Report at nine tomorrow morning. I'll work with you before rehearsal begins."

Claudia's mother was in bed but not asleep when they arrived home. "Well, she asked pleasantly, "was it a nice rehearsal, did you enjoy it?"

"Listen to the woman, was it a nice rehearsal, did we enjoy it?" Claudia echoed.

"You see before you, Madam," said David with a low bow, "Miss Dusey Bernhardt herself."

Claudia kicked him. "Oh, tell her decently, don't spoil it."

"Tell me what?" demanded Mrs. Brown. "What have you two crazy fools done now?"

They both began to talk at once. Mrs. Brown took off her glasses and looked troubled. "But I don't understand," she said

at last. "Begin all over again. What happened to the girl that was playing the part of Betsy, originally?"

"She got mad and went back to New York just before we arrived at the rehearsal."

"What was she mad about?"

"Tory Manners wrote the part over. She changed it from a sister to a cousin and when she got finished with it, it wasn't big enough for Vivien Brooks to do because Vivien made a hit last year on Broadway."

"Well, is this Miss Manners the author of the play?"

"No, she's the star," David put in patiently.

"But you said——"

"Yes, I know," Claudia interrupted. "Look, Mamma, stars always rewrite plays, especially first plays. The thing is, everybody was upset and they were going to have the understudy do the part when Tory suddenly pointed to me and screamed out, 'There's your Betsy!'"

Mrs. Brown sat up in bed, clutching modestly at her nightgown straps. "Goodness, what did you say?" she gasped.

"I almost fainted. I said, 'Oh, my Lord, I couldn't'——"

"And then what happened?"

"I gave her a shove," said David. "I said, 'Go ahead and have a whack at it, you chump'."

"How was she?" Mrs. Brown was breathless with suspense.

"Lousy," Claudia briefly interjected.

"Which was why they gave it to you," David snorted.

Claudia wanted to tell him that he had hit upon the truth, but she hated to have him think she was a cat. The more she thought about it, however, the more certain she was of the motive that lay behind Tory's seeming generosity. Tory had everything to gain and nothing to lose. If Claudia played Betsy, it would bring David to the theatre and Tory would see him every night, and the worse she was in the part the better Tory would like it.

Claudia wondered how she suddenly knew so much about the way that women functioned. It must be living on a farm, she concluded. When you lived in a New York apartment you never associated a bull with a glass of milk, or a rooster with an egg or a papa pig with a slice of ham. But owning a farm was like running a matrimonial bureau in the zoo. It gave you the key to a lot of things you never knew or recognised before. For one thing, it gave Claudia the key to Tory Manners.

"Sex," declared Claudia, as she brushed her teeth that night, "is at the bottom of everything. If I don't hurry up and get some pretty quick I'm going to be definitely out of luck."

Still, she couldn't worry about it while she had her part to learn. If you wanted to do it really well, sex was probably a full-time job in itself. As it was, she hardly closed an eye all night for thinking about the play, which wasn't so very good in places—probably the places that Tory had rewritten.

"Eat something," said Claudia's mother at breakfast.

"I did," said Claudia.

David cruelly exposed the scrambled egg hiding under a piece of toast. "Never mind, Mother," he stood up for her, "she'll come down to earth in time."

He caught the train at Redbury, dropping her off at the playhouse. "I'll pick you up around six, unless you phone to the contrary," he arranged.

"Wish me luck," she quavered.

It was just nine o'clock, but the director didn't show up until ten, and even so, he looked as if he had got up too early. It didn't occur to him to apologise for keeping her waiting, he merely scowled up at her from under his dark brows and said. "Come on."

He sat down in a camp chair on the empty stage and motioned her to fetch herself another one. It was hot and humid and there was a fly buzzing.

"God damn fly," said Mr. Jonas Kudo. "Snap into it. Read your first scene," he commanded gruffly.

The script shook in Claudia's hand. She'd read the scene pretty well in the bathroom to David while he was shaving, but now her throat closed up and her knees knocked together.

"Take it easy," said Mr. Kudo. "Take it easy."

"I am," said Claudia unhappily.

"Y'see," Mr. Kudo stopped to explain. "Betsy's only a kid. She hates Gwendolyn's guts. After she falls in love with Gwen's boy friend, she tries to kill herself——"

"I know," interrupted Claudia eagerly. "But you don't have much sympathy for Betsy, do you think so?"

"Sure not. She's one of those neurotic little bastards, you could kick her tail——"

"But *shouldn't* you have sympathy for her?"

He observed her shrewdly. "Try and get it."

"But I don't think you can!"

"That's your answer," he informed her bluntly. "Go ahead and read——"

"But wait a minute," she argued. "If you don't get sympathy, you'll get a laugh on her big scene, won't you?"

"What's to prevent?" he remarked laconically

"Nothing. It's the way it's written. I mean, it's the situation——"

He flew into a temper. "Say, listen!" he shouted. "What the hell are you, a star? The play's been changed six times! I'm nuts! The whole blasted cast is nuts! The author's nuts. But it's a Manners vehicle, so put up or shut up, the way the rest of us are doing! D'you want the part, or don't you?"

"No," said Claudia gravely. "I don't really want it at all. But I'm going to play it. That is," she added politely, "if you don't mind too much."

He gave her another look. He took out his handkerchief, with automobile grease on it, and wiped his forehead. "God damn that fly," he said. He lit out for it, grabbing at the air. "Got it." He unloosed his fist. There wasn't anything there.

A laugh bubbled out of Claudia. He glowered at her. Then he laughed, too. He had a nice face when he laughed, although his teeth could have been better. "Go on, honey, read the scene."

She wasn't bad until the author came in. He stood listening to her and gnawing his nails. "Oh, this is terrible!" he burst out finally.

"Get the hell out of here," bawled the director.

The author ran away, but in a little while he was back again, wringing his hands. "It's twelve o'clock already. Where's Tory? Where's everybody?"

"How the hell should I know?" shouted Kudo.

It was a madhouse—a glorious, devastating madhouse. "I love you, I love you, I love you!" Three love-you's to the leading man and then three hate-you's to Gwendolyn on the curtain of the same act. "I hate you, I hate you, I *hate you*!" She tried it in a crescendo. She tried it grinding it out between her teeth. "No, darling, no," corrected Tory. "That's *all* wrong! More fury, more—well, more *hatred*!"

"Hello."

Claudia's head buzzed. She looked up, dazed. "David!" Her heart stopped beating. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing wrong, it's six o'clock."

Six o'clock. She couldn't believe it. A day had passed. "I'll telephone home at noon," she had said to Bertha, because Bobby had had a little snuffle. Noon had come and gone. She hadn't eaten any lunch. She was aware of it all at once, only she felt more sick than hungry.

"How did it go?" asked David.

"Beautifully," Tory swiftly answered. "Though, of course, it's

ghastly for the poor lamb with only a week before we open."

Tory had got David to give her a cigarette. She was steadying his hand while he held the match for her. "Thank you." She smiled at him as if they had a secret together, which Claudia knew they didn't. "The poor child," Tory went on compassionately, "is just a rag."

Claudia resented being called a rag by anyone who was cool and immaculate in dark-blue linen and perfume. Tory hadn't appeared until an hour ago. Tory, according to her own announcement, had had a couple of sets of thrilling tennis and a divine swim.

The author came over. His face was filthy from goodness knew what, and two buttons were off. "You're not quitting are you, Betsy?" His voice rasped with worry. "Kudo's gone to grab a sandwich. He'll be back. He said he'd work with you on the suicide scene."

Claudia's heart ached for the author. Her eyes sought David's. "Would you go home without me, please, dear?"

"I'll hang around," said David co-operatively. "We'll have a bite together down here——"

"Oh, no, dear. I won't bother to stop for supper. I had a big lunch." Yesterday, she supplemented silently. "All I want is a sandwich——"

"I'll bring it to you from the drugstore," the author offered eagerly. "What kind?"

"Anything."

"Peanut butter," he decided brilliantly.

She stopped him. "Look, not peanut butter. Anything but peanut butter or ham——"

"Listen, dear," David began.

"Oh, David. please darling——"

Tory laughed. "Children, don't quarrel."

"We're not quarrelling. Only David's got to have more than a sandwich after a hard day in New York."

"Of course, David has to have more than a sandwich," Tory agreed. "David, be a good boy." She put her arm around Claudia. "Shall I take him to the inn and see that he eats a good steak dinner?"

"Bertha has everything ready." Claudia felt prim and economical.

David frowned. "Darling, don't be silly. Why should I take that long trip home——"

Kudo came in, drinking lemon soda with a straw.

"All set!" he shouted. "Come on, Betsy, snap into it. Be

back by nine, will you, Tory, we'll run through the first act again——"

"Oh, we'll be back before nine," Tory sweetly promised.

"Good-bye, David." Claudia tried to leave, but Kudo was pulling her away. The author dashed in with a sandwich and thrust it at her. If a person doesn't like peanut butter he can smell it a mile away.

"It's peanut butter!" she accused him hotly.

"That's what you wanted!" the author shouted.

"I didn't. I said not peanut butter and not ham!"

"Claudia," begged David, drifting back, "come on out with us——"

"She can't!" bawled Kudo. "The hell with eating!"

"The hell with eating yourself!" David's nostrils flared.

"She's coming out for a hot dinner and an hour's rest!"

"David, I can't!"

"Come on, darling——" Tory tugged at his arm. "You're only complicating matters. Let the poor lamb be."

Claudia threw her a look of gratitude. "Oh, take him!" she begged. Only once before in her life she had felt this way—when she was going under ether with Bobby.

She never really emerged from the feeling. She was aware that life went on, that Bobby cut his knee badly, and that her mother had to go back to town because some distant member of the family got a stroke and finally died. But for the most part, the week passed in a state of semi-consciousness, punctuated by a peanut butter sandwich every night for supper. The author was utterly out of his head and kept insisting that she liked them.

"I *do* like them!" she told David on Sunday night, after the dress rehearsal, and burst into tears.

"You don't!" David contradicted furiously. "What's more, you're getting out of this show right now, or you'll be a stark-staring lunatic by tomorrow, like all the rest of them! You're my wife, and I'm damned well not going to let you forget it!" His eyes were blazing, and he meant what he said. He closed the bedroom door, so as not to wake Bobby and stalked back to her.

"You're out. Do you understand it?"

"Certainly I understand it!" she flung at him hysterically. "And if anyone should ask you, I'm glad to be out. I'm rotten. I can't act worth a cent! Tory knows it, and you know it, and everybody knows it! That's all she was after—to show me up for a fool, to have everybody laugh at me. Well, she's done it! And she's had dinner with you every night, and you're in love with her and I wish I was dead—Let me go, you're hurting me!"

"I'll let you go," said David, "when I'm good and ready to let you go. His eyes were still blazing, but his voice was cold and even. "Now listen to me, you little quitter."

"Quitter!" she echoed shrilly.

"Yes, quitter. A little yellow-livered weak-kneed quitter."

"Oh, I hate you, I hate you, I *hate* you!" she cried.

"None of that Betsy. Save that for the footlights."

"Don't you dare to call me Betsy!"

"I'll call you what I damn please. Now listen to me. What's all this talk about not going through with this show? I'm ashamed of you——"

She gasped. "Not going through with it? Why you're crazy. You're crazier than the author and crazier than the director. You just told me I was out."

"Yes? Well, now I'm telling you you're in. Do you get that, you're in. You're going on that stage tomorrow night and you're going to bring the house down. You're going to make everybody else look like a piece of cheese, you're going to walk away with the whole show!"

She stared at him. He couldn't be in love with another woman or he wouldn't be talking that way. "You mean," she whispered, "that you want me to get the best of Tory Manners?"

"Tory Manners be damned," said David. "Claudia Naughton is the gal you're after."

Claudia's lips quivered. She turned away so that he couldn't see her tears. "It was a swell pep talk, David," she said unsteadily, "but it won't do any good. You were right. I'm a yellow quitter in a dark-blue funk."

David pulled out his pipe and filled it. "I certainly take my hat off to you, kid," he said at last.

This didn't make sense. "Why, pray?"

"Because," he said and puffed. "Because——" he took another puff and then tamped the tobacco with his finger.

"Because what?" Her nerves were at the breaking point.

"Because damned few women are honest."

"I knew that a long time ago," she said. "I found it out in a butcher shop. But what's that to do with taking your hat off to me?"

"It's got to do," he said, and threw the match into the fire-place, "because you realise you haven't anything on the ball and you've the courage to admit it. A lot of women wouldn't have the sense to recognise it and duck."

It took her quite a few moments to gather her wits about her.

"Are you suggesting by any chance, that I turn in the part tomorrow and let the understudy go on for me?"

David shrugged. "It's the only way," he said, "to save your face."

Claudia was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "Thanks, David, very much. That's a good idea."

"You're welcome," David answered.

They did not once mention the matter again. Claudia drove him to the station the next morning and met him on the 5.40.

"Hello," they said and kissed each other.

"How's Bobby's knee?" asked David.

"Fine."

"New lawn mower do a good job?"

"Yes, fine."

"Everything else all right?"

"Fine," said Claudia.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "You feeling all right?"

She nodded. "Yes fine. Why?"

"Nothing. I just wondered. What'd you do all day?"

"Went over to the theatre for a little while and then came home."

"Oh," said David. "Everything all right over there?"

"I guess so. It never is the day you open, though. I mean the lights weren't working or anything."

"Oh."

Bertha had an early supper waiting for them. Noodle soup which slipped down easily and meat balls, which were fairly easy, too.

"Your yellow dress looks better, I ironed it," Bertha offered passing the bread.

"Oh, thanks," said Claudia. "You're an angel."

"Wearing your yellow?" asked David.

"It's all I've got. It'll look all right."

"It'll look fine," said David. "Time if we leave at eight?"

"Oh, certainly," said Claudia. "Loads. The curtain won't go up till nine, I guess."

"I guess not," said David.

There were crowds around the theatre at eight-fifteen and a regular traffic jam of cars.

"What a mob!" said David, surprised.

"Tory would draw a crowd anywhere. Look. There's the Riddles and a lot of people we met at their party."

"It's as gala as the opening of the opera." His hand crushed

hers. His fingers were icy cold. She hardly ever remembered David's hand being cold. It was usually warm and steady. She felt sorry for him, she wanted to put her arms around him. He didn't know what it was all about; he was just playing along with her and not asking questions. She wasn't sure she knew what it was all about herself. She only knew that she was going to do what she had to do.

They made their way to the lobby, where placards announced that Victoria Manners was appearing in a new play, entitled "Ticket to Heaven."

"Well," said Claudia casually, "I'll be leaving you here. See you later."

David looked at her and, without a word, put out his hand. It wasn't cold any longer; it felt strong and comforting and warm, as if life had started suddenly to course once more through his veins. She clung to him, thankful to the very depths of her that he was there.

"So long, David."

"So long, Claudia."

She glanced back at him. He was watching her as she moved through the crowd toward the stage entrance. There was something in his face that made her feel rich and proud, and as though the old yellow dress were fashioned of wings.

She bumped into Kudo. He was tearing his hair out. "You're late!" he roared at her. What a thoroughly earthy little man he was — no wings at all. Nobody had wings. Everybody bumped into her, hurrying and scurrying, and full of a harsh frenzy. She heard Tory's voice, screaming through her dressing-room, "Mathilda! Where in the name of heaven are you?" Mathilda came running from the lavatory, her moist black eyes rolling in her head. "I'm comin', Miss Manners, I'm comin'!"

Claudia went to her own dressing-room, a stifling little box at the end of the hall. She just needed to change into her dark-blue slacks and a white blouse. She kept the same things on throughout the play, although Tory changed six times, all the way from shorts to a sable coat.

The door flung open and the author burst in. His hair was in his eyes with running, and his poor chicken-pox marks stood out like anything in his thin white face. "You here?" he demanded frantically.

"Yes, I'm here," said Claudia.

Words poured from his trembling lips. "Listen, you've got to do something about it, those laughs you got last night were God-awful, it'll ruin my whole play, you got to watch out, you got

to do something to stop them—Gates and Furbish are out front—and if the audience laughs in the wrong place, my God, it's going to be terrible——”

The door opened and an arm came through and grabbed the poor author by the neck. “Get the hell out o’ here, mind your damned business, I’m directing this show!” Kudo stuck his head in. “The guy is cracked,” he informed her dispassionately. “Gates and Furbish are out front.” Why didn’t the bastards come at the end of the week——” He was gone.

Gates and Furbish. No wonder Frederick was so excited. If one or the other of them brought his play into New York, he was made. It didn’t make so much difference to Tory—if it weren’t this play it would be another, or still another. “Poor Freddie,” murmured Claudia. Everyone called him Freddie. Nobody thought much of an author until his play was a success. You couldn’t very well have a successful play, though, if you got laughs where you were supposed to get tears. “I love you, I love you, I love you!” Claudia said the words aloud. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” Love and hate. It was the whole play, it was the whole of life, and it was really written into the one little part of Betsy.

“Curtain! Curtain!”

She thought that something must be the matter with her, because her heart didn’t even skip a beat. “Maybe I’m dead,” she thought. “Maybe I died of fright coming over to the theatre and this is my etheric body. Maybe that’s why I feel as if I have wings.” Well, if it was her etheric body, nothing could hurt it. It was a wonderful idea. “I’m not me,” she told herself. “I’m just managing me for myself.”

She listened to Tory’s voice from the wings—deep and throaty and even more English than usual. She waited. They’d expected a laugh on that line. But not a sound. “It didn’t go over,” whimpered the author, wringing his hands.

“God-damned tough audience,” muttered Kudo. He turned to Claudia and gave her a push. “You’re on——”

“No, not yet——” said Claudia, hanging back.

Two more lines of Tory’s and then, “The poor darling was always a little bit queer——”

Claudia moved out on to the stage. She couldn’t help feeling shocked and hurt. But how silly! She wasn’t supposed to have heard what Tory—or Gwen, rather—said in the play. But suppose she did hear? It was possible. Why not? Of course she heard, and she was hurt and sick, because of it. She wanted to run and tell the author her startling discovery. “Listen, Freddie,”

she wanted to announce to him, "Guess what! Betsy hears what Gwen said! It makes all the difference!" Well, she'd have to tell him later. But in the meantime, Betsy heard, there was no getting away from it. She was acting like she heard, too—bruised and defensive—and on account of trying not to show it, just a little arrogant and shrill.

"Ahh—" It was a whisper of pity from someone in the first row of seats.

The sound came to Claudia's ears. "They know she heard!" She was happy as could be about it. What a wonderful audience. They got it at once. She didn't have to fight them into understanding Betsy and feeling sorry for her, the way she had had to do at dress rehearsal. They were understanding everything, and in the second act when Betsy would say "I love you," and "I hate you," they'd understand that, too, and it wouldn't be necessary for her to say it three times, maybe.

Somebody started to clap and interfered with Betsy's speech. Claudia had to shut her up until the clapping stopped. Tory was furious at the interruption. She was glaring at Betsy. ("She's glaring at me, not Betsy," thought Claudia, surprised. "What could I have done?") Then Tory slipped up on her lines. There was a nervous little giggle out front that made Tory even angrier. Claudia said out loud: "Please don't be angry with me." It was Betsy talking, of course, because it was what Betsy would have said, even though it wasn't in the script. But that didn't matter because it was only Gwen and Betsy playing the scene together and it didn't throw anybody else out. It saved Gwen, though. It made it much more real when she picked up the book and flung it down again—it made it much more real when Betsy just stood, a little helpless and confused, and then took a couple of steps and changed her mind, and then just walked off the stage—

She jumped as she reached the wings. There was a noise. It shredded from being a solid noise into many separate noises, sharp and clear and flat. It was applause and people were crying "Bravo!" Somebody pulled her backward, somebody kissed her violently. She pushed away. It was Kudo. She rubbed at her lips. She didn't like being kissed by anyone but David. The author was waving his arms around. She could see by the way he advanced upon her that he, too, was going to kiss her. The curtain was down now and Tory was walking off the stage. She had no intention of kissing Claudia, that was evident. She hissed between her teeth. "You little fool—stick to your lines, will you? You've ruined the whole act!"

"The hell she did!" shouted Kudo. "Listen! They're calling for her!"

The author was crying like a baby, with the tears streaming down his poor white face. "Oh, my God, they like it," he kept saying. "They like my play, they like it!"

David didn't come backstage until after the last act. And then, when he walked into her dressing-room, the first thing he said was, "The Riddles are throwing a big party with champagne."

"Is Tory going to be there?"

"Yes, but Mrs. Riddle told me privately it was in your honour."

"Want to go?" she asked him, trying to be nonchalant about it.

He came and took her hand. His fingers were icy cold again. "You bet I want to go."

"You lie," she said. "You don't want to go at all and neither do I. I want to go home—to bed."

"Claudia," he said. "You can't go to bed. You're a celebrity. Everybody's talking about you out there. You can go to bed all the rest of your life. But not tonight."

She shook her head. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed tonight," she reiterated stubbornly. It was funny—like a comedy line in a vaudeville skit. They began to laugh, and they laughed and laughed.

Kudo burst in, without knocking. Claudia was in her panties. She snatched up her yellow dress and held it against her. "Think nothing of it, honey, it's the show business," he assured her largely.

"Then to hell with show business," said David with his nostrils ominous. "Why the devil can't you knock?"

"Because I got a great piece of news—Furbish says the show is lousy, but you were swell! He wants to see you at the inn tomorrow."

"Me?"

"Sure, you. I'll call you in the morning and take you over there."

"Thanks," said David curtly. "I'll take her over there myself."

Kudo's black eyes shot fire. "That's right," he spat out with contempt. "Go on—ruin her chances, ruin her life—I've seen you little suburban guys do the same thing time and time again!"

"Get out," said David quietly.

When they were alone, Claudia said sadly, "Kudo's right. You're going to stand in the way of my being a great actress."

He put his arms around her. "Not much I'm not, Claudia." His voice was pretty husky. "Furbish says you've got the stuff. I was talking to him out front."

A light broke over her. "Oh, so that's why you didn't come back to see me between the acts——"

He shook his head. "I didn't come back because you didn't need me. You were better off alone."

"How did you know that?" she asked him, wonderingly.

"Because I love you."

"That wouldn't make sense to anyone but us."

"It's all it's supposed to make sense to."

She wanted to hug him for saying that. But instead she tossed her head and looked nasty. "You think you're smart, don't you? You think you know everything about me. You think I want to go to the Riddles' party, you think I want to waste my life with men like Furbish and Gates."

"What do you want to do?" He caught her to him and pulled her very close. He was strong and hurt her and she loved it. She breathed a sigh of ecstasy. "I told you. I just want to go home and go to bed—and then, I want to wait."

"Wait for what—for them to come to you?"

She had to smile. He was so urgent, so ready in his love for her, to think things that really weren't so. She patted his shoulder.

"Only for Nature," she said demurely.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRIBUTE TO DAVID

CLAUDIA broke a fingernail on the dining-room window and used a word that made her mother jump. "Why, Claudia Brown!" she exclaimed aghast. (In moments of stress, Mrs. Brown always forgot Claudia had a married name.) "Why, Claudia Brown," she said, "wherever did you learn such language?"

"From David," Claudia replied. She turned to him as he entered, shrugging into his coat and looking like train time even before he sat down to breakfast. "Don't I, darling?" she inquired with a pleasant smile.

"Don't you what?"

"Learn everything I know from you."

"But everything," said David firmly. He dug into his grapefruit. "Sorry. Was that your eye. Mother?"

"No, it was my eye," said Claudia coldly.

David grinned. "Good shot."

Claudia took a deep breath. Mrs. Brown looked agitated. "Claudia, don't you dare! David, you simply have to talk to her about her language."

"Claudia," said David, "you grieve me."

The telephone rang—one long, two short. Claudia jumped up. "It's us," she said.

"Bertha'll go, sit down."

But Claudia was already out of the room. If she'd a dozen servants, she would have rushed to the telephone just the same. David, who'd been interested in glands for quite some time, said it was the hyperthyroid in her. But Claudia knew it was just insatiable curiosity. Curiosity was one of her besetting sins. Not that she'd ever pick up anyone's letter and read it—she was almost always scrupulously honest—but in the subway, for example, she loved to look at the headlines of somebody else's newspaper, and

she could never resist straining her ears to catch a passing conversation.

The novelty of a party telephone had not yet worn off and was like liquor to her. Not for worlds would she have admitted this weakness to David, who thought insignificant crime ignoble. He could admire a magnificent liar, or an out-and-out crook, but he had only contempt for the sort of person who couldn't leave a hotel room without annexing a towel or an ashtray, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that listening in on a telephone fell under a like category of petty vices.

It was funny how she valued his respect—hardly any married people she knew seemed to have that feeling toward each other, yet it was a point of pride in both of them to maintain a level of mutual regard. There were times, actually, when she had to sit on her hands in order not to lift the receiver, but her record of self-discipline was practically irreproachable—with one glaring exception. Her number had rung at two o'clock in the morning last week. David happened to be in New York overnight on business, and she was sure that something must have happened to him. All the black terror of his accident flooded back on her as she groped blindly across the bed-table for the instrument.

"Hello," she said, in a fear-choked voice.

"I say, Mary——"

"No Mary lives here," Claudia rasped back, shrewish with relief.

"Isn't this 32 ring 1-3?"

"It's 32 ring 1-2, and I wish you'd be a little more careful at this hour."

"Oh, I say, I *am* sorry."

"A fat lot that helps," she mumbled, banging up the receiver with every bit of sleep out of her.

The telephone pealed again. It rang twice, and then stopped short of the third ring. At that point Claudia knew no conflict. Having been rudely awakened in the middle of the night, and having nothing whatever to do to pass the time, it seemed no more than fair that she should occupy herself by listening in.

She heard the same voice speaking. "Is that you, Mary?"

And then Mary's voice materialised, very Irish and devoted, and said, "Oh, is that you, Mr. Jerry?"

Mr. Jerry said it was, and would she be a sweet old slob and look in the file under S and see if there was a manuscript envelope with "Sad Ecstasy" written on it in red pencil?

It seemed ages before the sweet old slob came back to the telephone and said that "Sad Ecstasy" had been found under Y, and Mr. Jerry seemed very happy and relieved, and said that he was

frightfully sorry to have disturbed her, but he'd thought "Sad Ecstasy" had been lost, and how were things getting along, and he'd be up on Friday.

Very carefully, Claudia laid the receiver back on its cradle, as she knew she couldn't fool the operator. She racked her brains who Jerry was and how such a summery-sounding voice could have suddenly landed in Eastbrook in the middle of winter. But while she was thinking about it she fell asleep and never thought about it again.

This morning, as she answered the telephone at breakfast, she heard a small click which told her experienced ears that someone else on the line wanted to find out who was calling the Naughtons so early in the morning. "Busybody," she thought indignantly. "There's no such thing as privacy in a small town."

"Yes?" Her voice was chilly—aimed directly at the eaves-dropper.

"Hello, Lady Claudia."

"Oh, hello, Roger. I'll call David."

"Lovey-dovey's on the phone," she reported, hurrying back to her hot toast.

"Killian?" David put his coffee cup down abruptly, and under his breath he said the very word that had made Mrs. Brown jump a short while before.

Mrs. Brown turned red and Claudia laughed. "Why, David, you grieve me——" she threw after him.

After a moment or so he returned. "Look, darling," he said, gulping down the rest of his coffee, "help me throw some things into my suit-case, will you?"

"Suit-case? What for?"

"Sorry, darling, I have to go to Baltimore——"

Her heart sank to her boots. "Baltimore's terribly far, isn't it?"

"Only five hours——"

"Will you be back tonight?"

"I'll be lucky if I'm back in a week."

Her lips were stiff as wood. "A week! Why David, that's an eternity! Can't Roger go instead? His wife won't even miss him——"

"He's got to go to St. Louis. Now finish your breakfast, and heaven help you if I haven't enough clean shirts."

"Bertha ironed yesterday," Claudia mechanically replied. "I don't want any more breakfast."

She helped him to pack, trying to keep her voice natural, as if a clump of tears weren't at the other end of it. "I don't believe you're going to miss me——"

"Oh, no," said David. "I'm not going to miss you." He grabbed her hard. "Look, you, don't you do anything crazy while I'm away——"

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like falling down the steps or eloping with the vacuum cleaner man."

"It's the bread man I'm in love with. Listen David——"

"What?"

"My birthday's next month and I don't want a sable coat."

"Always changing your mind. What do you want instead?"

"I want you to phone me every night. You know, after seven, when it's reduced."

He kissed her three times, hard. She whimpered a little. "Ouch! Right on my neck, and I bet you twenty cents it shows."

"Let it show," cried David. "It's my trade mark."

Fritz was waiting at the car—a two-year-old station wagon which David had purchased shrewdly at the tail end of the summer season. "I think maybe Louella is ready today," he announced in a discreetly lowered voice.

David beamed. "Fine. Keep an eye on her, and if she is, put the sides on the truck and take her down."

Claudia understood. She had caught on to a lot of things, although David said she still wasn't any too smart. "Poor thing," she murmured. "What a steady grind. Can't a cow ever have a sabbatical or something?"

David didn't hear her—he was too busy drinking in every word Fritz had to say about the new chickens. "Listen," she protested as they drove away, "who are you going to miss more—me or the barnyard?"

"Don't be silly," David promptly answered. "The barnyard, of course."

They made fools of themselves at the train—Claudia running after it down the platform and David stepping on people in order to wave to her out different windows. It was odd how you could keep on loving a person more and more—and it wasn't one-sided either. David said that every time he came home at night he loved her more than when he had left in the morning. "He'll be mad about me by the time this week is over," she thought, with as much complacency as a breaking heart could hold.

On the way home she stopped in at the store for dog food.

"Will that be all, Mrs. Naughton?"

Claudia said, "That's all." There wasn't any sense in marketing for a husbandless household—eggs would do for lunch and last night's roast of lamb for supper.

The grocery man lifted the dusty fifty-pound bags of biscuit into the back of the wagon for her. He said, as he always said, "Sure must cost something to feed them big dogs you got." Claudia conceded that it sure did, and drove off like a lost soul.

The bleak countryside became her mood—stripped and desolate—with a hint of early snow in an unforgiving sky, and the air full of the nostalgic smell of burning leaves. She tried to imagine how she'd feel if she were in New York again—crowds and traffic and noise, and toward night everyone hurrying home to lighted windows looking down on darkened streets. "I wouldn't like that either," she thought. "I wouldn't like any place in the whole world without David." It occurred to her that she was frightfully dependent upon him—and he upon her. It wasn't right—it wasn't intelligent or sensible to cut themselves off as they had. If she died, for example, there'd be hardly a flower at her funeral. Whereas Julia, who had had an operation last month, was simply besieged with attention. Practically every acquaintance she had ever cultivated, every party she had ever given, had come back to roost, so to speak, and it was hospital history that on one single day, Mrs. Hartley Naughton had received fourteen baskets of fruit, twenty-two books, and eight boxes of flowers.

"I'm going to talk to David about it when he gets back," Claudia decided. "We simply have to have a few friends in case of emergency, we ought to begin to ask people out for week-ends."

David, of course, wouldn't like the idea at all. When they had first bought the farm, he had said, "Don't let's turn the place into a wayside inn for a lot of dopes we don't give a damn about."

She had swiftly agreed. "Let's don't, it only means clean sheets and asking how they slept, and for what?"

They'd been very pleased to find themselves in accord on the subject, and both of them had discovered that it was a great deal more enjoyable to spend a Sunday with your own pigs and sheep than see a lot of people who were only a poor imitation of the animals and nowhere near as sincere.

Now, however, a sudden devastating loneliness awakened in her a belated social instinct. It was different with David—he had professional contacts which stimulated and engrossed him. It would also have been different with Claudia had she gone back to the stage and developed an independent interest in life. Not that she regretted her decision; indeed, David told her it was the smartest thing she could have done, because she might have been an utter flop, and then her dream would have been finished once and for all. It was a little subtle, but she knew what he meant. He was right, too, for lurking secretly in her breast was a com-

forting nest-egg of insurance against the great middle-class ailment of the housewife's neurosis. She could say to herself, "If I don't have another baby by the time Bobby goes to kindergarten, I'll sublimate my energies and begin to make something of myself." She was almost certain that she could, and, by the same token, she was almost certain that when she and David decided not to be hermits any longer, they could attract to themselves all manner of exciting friends and experiences — for, without being at all swell-headed, she knew perfectly well that they were young and good-looking and far from dull.

At the moment, she was glad that her mother happened to be visiting them; having her there would make the days less empty during David's absence. There weren't many mothers, she reflected, who, on the whole, were as satisfying as her own. Sometimes David said Claudia had a mother image, but he wasn't upset about it, because it didn't seem to be causing any disturbance. Besides, he had grown tremendously fond of Mrs. Brown. He hadn't kissed her goodbye this morning, but he'd pinched the tip of her nose, and Mrs. Brown had said "Fresh," and anybody could have seen how they really felt about each other. "I'm lucky," thought Claudia, and a sense of gratitude overlaid her loneliness.

She might have gone on into quite a philosophical debauch if, at that instant, the right front tyre hadn't exploded, causing the car to veer drunkenly out of control and skid into a soft mud-bank at the side of the road.

Shocked and affronted, she turned off the motor and climbed out. Once before she had had a flat tyre, but she had managed to get home, anyway, even though it had felt like somebody else was steering the wheel in the opposite direction. She had expected David to compliment her on her dogged perseverance, but he'd said that was a fine way to ruin a car and didn't she know any better? "Here," he'd said, "I'll show you how to change a tyre." But after a few minutes he told her to skip it. "If you ever get another flat," he instructed her severely, "ask for help or get to the nearest telephone, *but don't drive on it!*"

This was wonderful advice, four miles from home on a deserted road. She sat down on the step of the car to wait for a passing delivery truck. A dead leaf wafted to the ground, a cock crowed in the distance, and that was all. She rose restlessly, trying to remember just how David had fitted the jack beneath the wheel. Whatever the trick was, the car had certainly wafted up in the air with the greatest of ease.

She opened the door and shoved the front seat awry. Yes, the

tools were there, along with an automobile map and one of the dog's leashes—and there was something else, small and bright. She swooped it up with a cry of malicious pleasure. David's pipe scraper. He'd been looking for it for ages—making everybody's life miserable about it. It didn't have the slightest value, it was just that he perversely hankered after it and brooded endlessly on its loss.

"Did you find my pipe scraper?" he'd demand every so often.

"That's all I have to do, look for your pipe scraper."

He blamed her for its disappearance, supposing bitterly, that she'd pitched it out for a piece of junk. He'd even blamed Bobby, who might have played with it and lost it. "You're psychotic on the subject of that pipe scraper!" Claudia had accused him on the verge of tears. "For heaven's sakes, here's a quarter, go get yourself another one!"

"I don't want another one," he'd answered sullenly. "I want that one. I've had it for ten years."

It had almost been the cause of a divorce between them, and here it was, sweet as you please, under the front seat of the car. "I'll make him pay for this," she decided with grim relish as she slipped it in her pocket. "I'll make him crawl on his knees before I give it to him."

She had been so absorbed in her discovery that she hadn't noticed anyone passing. She ducked out of the car door just in time to see the figure of a man swinging off up the road, in the same direction she was facing. "Hey!" she called out after him. "Hey, Mister!"

Mister didn't hear her. He kept marching along, head down, hands in pockets. She stared after him. She didn't know who he was, but he wore pants and anything in pants ought to be able to change a tyre. Then she noticed that he wasn't wearing pants, he was wearing riding breeches and high boots. "A tree surgeon," she sized him up—although what would a tree surgeon be doing so far from a tree? "Hey, Mister!" she shouted again.

He heard her this time and turned round. For no good reason she registered that he was unusually tall—really quite a few inches taller than David, who was by no means short—and that he was very thin, in a patrician sort of way.

"I beg your pardon?" He frowned faintly and Claudia saw, too late, that he was not the kind of person that you address as "Hey, Mister!"

"How do you do?" she meekly corrected herself. "I have a flat tyre."

"Have you?" His rejoinder was civil, but completely lacking

in compassion. "I'm very sorry," he said and started to walk on.

Claudia blinked. "Hey!" she called after him, "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

He paused once more. "What would you like me to do about it?" he inquired.

"Well, you could at least change it for me," she suggested indignantly.

He seemed to consider it and then said, quite logically, "I dislike to change tyres very much."

She was speechless with amazement. He was the sort of person you'd see in a bad play. He had no dimension of reality; he didn't seem to be made of flesh and blood. As she stood gaping at the politeness of his rudeness he gave the impression of tipping his hat—although his black wavy hair was bare—and calmly moved along again.

Claudia lost her temper. "Listen," she informed him with blazing eyes. "I think it's about the most unmanly thing I ever heard of to leave a woman stranded with a flat tyre and not to lift a finger about it!"

He turned, and the way he did it indicated that it was for the third and last time. "My dear lady," he said in a tone heavy with exhausted patience, "will you kindly stop interrupting my train of thought?"

Claudia regarded him with new interest. At last she'd found out what was the matter with him—he had a train of thought. "Oh, why didn't you tell me?" she apologised. "I'll just wait on here until I get a lift."

A look of relief came over his face. "That's the most intelligent thing to do," he approved.

"Of course, I'll probably starve to death," she mentioned.

A faint smile, a very faint smile, tugged at the corners of his lips. They were sensitive lips, surmounted by a small black moustache. "I really shouldn't like you to starve to death. Would you care to telephone?"

"I'd love to. Have you a telephone on you?"

He looked through and beyond her. "I live about half a mile away," he informed her distantly, and without further ado he plunged back into his train of thought and took off, hands deep in pockets.

She watched him go. So the faint smile hadn't meant a sense of humour after all—probably indigestion like babies get. She stood indecisive. Part of her wanted to yell after him to jump in the lake, but part of her was consumed with an acute attack of curiosity.

Half a mile away. That meant the little brown house set back from the road, with all the lilacs. Last summer an artist, with a beret, had lived in it and had painted bright blurry pictures of all the old barns along the roadside. "I hope Eastbrook doesn't turn into a damn artist colony," David had grumbled apprehensively.

"If," thought Claudia, galloping along behind the long legs, "the little brown house is dirty, this one's an artist, too."

But when she arrived, very much out of breath, she saw at once that the little brown house was spotlessly clean and there wasn't the sign of an easel or palette. Instead, a huge flat-top desk took up most of the living-room, and on it, meticulously arranged, stood a neat row of sharpened pencils, a box of manuscript paper, several files, and a portable typewriter. "He's an author taking himself seriously," Claudia concluded, and in some way she felt as if she had lived through the experience before. It was an elusive sensation and one which shredded bewilderingly as she tried to pin her mind down on some definite memory of association.

It was not until she started to telephone home that it came to her. The two telephones were on the same line and there wasn't a doubt in the world that her host was Mr. Jerry of "Sad Ecstasy." No wonder it had all seemed familiar to her. It was really quite a joke. She'd tell him about it, of course, and maybe the humour of it would melt him into a human being. He might even make a story of it. She glanced at him as he seated himself at the desk and restlessly thumbed a pile of papers. His mood hadn't improved; indeed he seemed to be gritting his teeth in a very ominous kind of way, which made it rather difficult to confess that she'd deliberately eavesdropped on one of his private conversations.

"You haven't been here very long, have you?" she began indirectly.

His shoulders stiffened. "No."

He rose and stalked out of the room, with the obvious intention of discouraging further conversation. "If you must intrude on my privacy," his manner clearly implied, "pray don't be chatty about it."

Claudia couldn't help boiling a little. After all, if she was good enough for David to be crazy about, she was good enough to be regarded with a slight degree of interest by somebody else. It was nothing short of an insult to the man who loved you to have another man treat you like dirt.

It was only her mother's voice over the other end of the wire that prevented her from throwing a piece of her mind after him.

"Are you really all right?" Mrs. Brown reiterated and Claudia had to assure her at some length that a flat tyre didn't affect anything else but the tyre.

She hung up the receiver as the author reappeared, wearing a guilty look around the mouth, which made her know at once that he had just sneaked something from the ice-box. "Pig," she addressed him silently. She wanted to say, "What was it, a piece of celery or a chicken bone?" She wondered how he'd take it. Probably with a stony stare. "I wouldn't waste my wit on him, he's too stuffy," she decided. She had to admit, however, that although the back of his neck couldn't compare to David's, he was handsome and wore stunning clothes. She wondered if David would call him a sissy. In a way he seemed to be, and in a way he seemed not to be. Suppose she were to inquire with a smile, "Are you a sissy?" It would certainly make him take notice of the fact that she was alive. She opened her lips to speak, but her courage wavered. "I'll be called for in a few minutes," she said instead.

"Quite all right." His manner was so clipped that it was barely civil. He turned his back on her and squared himself before the desk as if she were so much dust that had settled down in the room.

Her cheeks burned. She could have kicked herself. It was just like her to carry on scintillating conversations in her mind and then come out with something as dull as dishwater. Where was her sex? Where was her magnetism? A guinea hen had more technique than she had—because witness all the little guinea hens. Yet David had fallen in love with her on sight and after four years was more in love with her than ever. She remembered last night. He had whispered huskily, teasingly, "You're not beautiful, you're not bright, but you're as much wife as a man could want."

It had been like their honeymoon, except that it was even more beautiful, for all timidity was gone and in its place there was a great, generous giving and an enveloping peace. All morning the sweet aftermath of their attunement had lingered with her like a quiet glory. It was often so and David told her that it was the most perfect thing that could happen between two people, which made her feel queenly, somehow, as if her head belonged high.

The sound of a car in the driveway broke into her reflections. Her host was on his feet like a flash, and was at the door before the bell had a chance to ring. She heard Fritz's deep voice ask, with his punctilious foreign courtesy, "Mrs. Naughton is waiting, please?"

"She'll be right out."

The author returned to the room. "Your husband is here," he informed her brusquely.

She stared at him. Her husband! Fritz was all right, of course; Fritz was marvellous. But Fritz was essentially husband to Bertha, who weighed two hundred pounds and puffed. Claudia's eyes sought the mirror on the opposite wall. She looked a sight. No wonder he had mistaken her for a little country nobody; no make-up, and her old brown coat. Nothing in the world, she suddenly realised, could be quite so brown or quite so old as an old brown coat and, to complete the picture, nothing could make a second-hand station wagon look less imposing than a flat tyre and two dusty bags of dog food sitting up in the rear of it, like lumpy old ladies. But no matter what he thought, she'd be a fool to take one insult after another without doing something about it. If she didn't his attitude was enough to give her an inferiority complex for the rest of her life. David would not know what had happened, but he would miss some indefinable voltage that had been part of her and in time their marriage would become a bloodless union which he would cease to cherish with jealousy and pride. It might sound a little far-fetched in theory, but in actual practice she knew that it was true.

She would never forget the way she had felt about Victoria Manners. Though it had seemed incredible at first, though the sun had vanished from the heavens, she had felt just a little proud because another woman had fallen in love with her husband; and for months after Tory had faded from the picture Claudia had looked at David with a keener appreciation and at the same time had experienced within herself a new sense of adequacy in realising that she had been able to hold him against the lure and fame and beauty.

She studied the author out of the corner of her eye. Yes, he was handsome, and for all she knew he was famous, too. The situations were identical in set-up. Only she, Claudia, had muffed her end of it and had let David down completely. If she was so unattractive that another man wouldn't even look at her, it didn't say much for David's taste—or her ability—to be all the wife he wanted. Definitely, he had to be vindicated. But how? She couldn't grab hold of Mr. Riding Breeches' lapel and say, "Look here, David isn't such a fool. I've got quite a lot beneath this old brown coat." And, anyway, it was too late, for his hand was already on her arm, propelling her gently but firmly towards the door. "Madam," he repeated, much too smoothly, "your husband is waiting and I have work to do."

She was wild. This was adding injury to insult. Madam, indeed. It was perfectly obvious that after being called Madam in that tone of voice she'd never succeed in attracting him. But she could at least jolt him out of that smug righteousness of his, and after he was sufficiently jolted she would tell him the truth, call it quits, and hope never to see him again all her life. It wouldn't help her sex appeal, but it would make her feel a lot better certainly; if she could play a hard part like Betsy she could carry off a medium that she had once seen in a movie. She hung back a little. "Please——"

"What's the matter?" His tone was sharp.

"Nothing—I—I'm sorry," she murmured unsteadily. "I get this way every once in a while, and when it comes over me——" Her voice trailed off. She looked up at him appealingly.

He frowned. "When what comes over you?"

"When I know things," she whispered. "Like—about you, for instance——"

"Well, what about me?"

"What your name is—and what you do——" She stopped short. "Mary. Was there a Mary in the house—in this room?"

It was funny to watch the puzzled expression which slowly spread across his face, but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of showing her that he was interested. "My mother's maid is called Mary," he admitted with a shrug. "I dare say you ran into her in some shop while she was up here getting the place in order for me——"

"No," said Claudia dreamily, "I didn't run into her in some shop." She lifted her lashes and found his eyes. "Mary's thinking of you this minute. She's saying in that nice Irish way of hers, 'I wonder how Mr. Jerry is making out all by himself——'"

There. She'd got him with that one. "Where'd you find out my name?" he demanded, considerably exercised.

She shook her head dazedly and passed her hand across her forehead. "I don't know. It just came. And there's something else trying to come through—something about a manuscript——"

"Yes?" His eyes were smiling now with an insolent amusement. He knew the answer to everything. He seemed to be saying, "I'm not sure how you found out my name, but the world is full of fakes and you're just another one."

"Oh, I am, am I?" she retorted inwardly. "Well, my dear Mr. Smart Aleck, you deserve everything you're going to get——" She looked up at him again and sighed deeply. "It's all so confused——" she breathed. "So terribly confused——"

His lips, his rather nice lips, twitched. "I should think it would be," he agreed.

He wasn't as gullible as she'd expected. She began all over again with another sigh. Her lids drooped heavily, but not so heavily that she couldn't keep an eye on him. "A manuscript—"

"Yes, a manuscript," he prompted tersely. "The desk is full of them."

"Yes, but this one—this one is different—you'd mislaid it—no, that isn't true——" She broke off, troubled, shook her head. "It's confused," she repeated helplessly. "I'm sorry. I imagine that perhaps you are making fun of all this, you don't believe—and then, you see, if a person doesn't believe, everything just closes off and it all becomes a blank——"

He cleared his throat. "Look here," he surrendered awkwardly, "I'm not making fun—I mean to say, I'm perfectly willing to open my mind, if that's what you want. Now what was that you said about a manuscript being mislaid?"

"Ah, at last," she applauded silently, but outwardly she remained grave and tense. She clasped her hands. "You found it!" she cried in a low voice. "It was lost and then you found it. It's strange. I get something that means unhappy——" She closed her eyes. "And yet," she murmured. "there's something that says just the opposite. Yes, very happy. First unhappy and then happy." She opened her eyes and fixed them, wide and baffled, on his face. "It's nonsense," she anticipated him wistfully. "It doesn't mean a thing to you, does it?"

He was very guarded about it. "It might," he admitted.

("I'm a louse," she told herself, "but he is, too, so we're square.")

"I get the word 'Sad'—she said, looking straight ahead.

This literally brought him to his knees before her. "Yes, yes——" he cried.

"And another word," she continued inexorably. "that's almost like 'Ecstasy'——"

"It is 'Ecstasy'!"

He said it so loudly that he scared her out of her wits and practically woke her out of her trance. "By God!" he cried, "this is extraordinary!—What's my last name?" he shot at her.

"I don't know," she stammered. She hadn't expected him to go up in the air over a couple of words. She glanced nervously at the door. "I have to go," she said.

But he had no intention of letting her go. His hand was again firm and compelling on her shoulder. "Sit down—please——"

"My husband wouldn't like it," she demurred, and knew it for the first honest statement she had made.

He strode towards the hall. "Mrs. Naughton will be out very shortly," he called to Fritz, and then he closed the door and pushed her into a chair. "I'll be frank with you," he said. "When you first started I thought you were pulling my leg. But there actually is a manuscript called 'Sad Ecstasy,' and my name is Jerry, which nobody has reason to know because I'm up here under an assumed name."

She wanted to ask why, and then realised that she was supposed to be omniscient.

"I've got to be alone. Undisturbed to finish my novel," he went on.

She rose with alacrity. "I'm interrupting you."

"Not a bit of it. I'm frightfully interested. I'm more than that—I'm profoundly stimulated."

"Oh dear," she said. "I wish you wouldn't be. I mean—it's awfully silly—really it is. I don't know anything. Why, I couldn't possibly tell you your last name," she burst out in confession.

"Try," he urged, taking her hands. "No, don't pull away. Close your eyes again and see if you can re-establish communication. Because there are other questions that I want terribly to ask——"

"I know I couldn't answer them," she explained miserably. "Please let go."

"You're marvellous," he exulted. "You aren't even aware that you have this strange power—you're completely unspoiled, utterly valid. Come. My first name is Jerry. My last name is——"

She was at her wits' end. He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't be told anything. Very well, she'd answer his stupid questions and he'd discover that she was a fake.

Obediently she closed her eyes. "Your name is——" She couldn't think of any last names. "It begins—with—C," she hazarded desperately. "There's more to it—but I can't get it——"

"That's wonderful!"

Her eyes flew open. "What's wonderful?"

He had both of her hands once more. His voice trembled. "Listen. My last name—my real name is—Seymour. You got it. actually—what I mean is it came through to you—though you weren't able to put it together."

Claudia wet her lips and swallowed. It was hard, to swallow. "Oh—you mean—C and more of it?—Seymour?"

"The name I've taken up here is Brainerd. John Brainerd. It's an old family name. The fact that you got Seymour is amazing!"

"Maybe it is," said Claudia in an awed voice.

She jumped a mile high as three light knocks sounded at the door. He jumped, too. But it wasn't spirits, it was only Fritz.

"Please," he firmly reminded them. "I am waiting for Mrs. Naughton."

Good old Fritz. David had told him to take care of all the animals and of her, too—and he was doing it. "I'm coming, Fritz." She turned to Mr. Seymour. "I've got to go—really I have."

"Where can I find you——"

"You can't."

"Then you must come back this afternoon——"

"No—no——"

"Tomorrow morning, then. At this time."

Fritz knocked again. He meant business.

"Tomorrow morning, or I shall find you—I'll go to every house until I find you——"

"Don't do that," she cried in panic.

"Then you'd better be here——"

Claudia studied him with a sinking heart. There was something in the way he spoke that told her that he, as well as Fritz, meant business.

David called up promptly at seven that evening.

"Hello——" said Claudia.

David said. "Your voice sounds funny. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Claudia. "It's just like usual."

As a matter of fact it wasn't like usual. She had a horrible feeling that Mr. Jerry Seymour might pick up his receiver at any moment and overhear a conversation not intended for his ears. It had been known to happen before.

"How are you?" she continued brightly. "Did you have a nice trip?"

"What in hell's wrong with you?" said David. "Do you love me or not?"

"Don't be silly. Of course I do."

"Do what?"

"Love you. Don't be silly."

"What'd you do today?"

She almost told him about the blow-out and then she thought she'd better not. "I had my hair waved this afternoon."

"What's the idea? Your hair's fine."

"I had nothing else to do."

"Isn't Mother there?"

"She took the 4.06 to New York. She got a hurry call that the ceiling in her apartment fell down and everything in the living-room's a wreck. Isn't that terrible? Except that it was good she wasn't in it."

"Very good," David agreed. "How's Bobby?"

"Fine. He threw your nailbrush down the whosis."

"I'll knock his block off," said David with a lift of pride in his voice. "Did Fritz say anything about Louella?"

"Oh, yes. He said to tell you she was fine. Or the bull was fine. I forget which. Is our three minutes up?"

"Anxious to get rid of me?"

"Oh, David, don't be silly."

"What's biting you?"

"Nothing."

"Try and fool somebody else——"

She winced. "Don't be silly. Listen," she added earnestly.

"I love you lots, only it's a party line."

"So what?" said David.

She couldn't think of anything else to say, so she said, "Oh, don't be silly."

She hardly closed her eyes all night. She had a feeling that she was much more involved than appeared on the surface. To begin with, she could see no other way out than to present herself to Mr. Jerry Seymour the following morning and tell him not to count on "Sad Ecstasy" being backed by the Higher Forces. It was only the forthright thing to do under the circumstances, even though she realised that it would necessitate making a clean breast of the whole affair. There was, however, no explanation to offer on having guessed his last name. She couldn't help being a little thrilled about that, although David would simply have a fit when he found out that she had psychic powers. He always said that if Joan of Arc had had a good he-man husband she'd never would have seen things.

She fell asleep at last, and wakened to the thin wintry sun filtering through the maple boughs outside her window. She spent ages rummaging through her closet. Her jersey suit would have been perfect, but the dogs had practically ruined it—except the riding habit she'd just inherited from Julia, who wasn't allowed any strenuous sports after her operation. "I'd be dumb not to wear it. Why not?" she said aloud and struggled into the breeches, and wound the stock around her neck, and tugged at the high, stiff boots until she almost burst a blood vessel.

When she was all dressed, the effect was worth the effort. She looked like an ad. for whisky, especially with the bowler. But she

decided not to wear the hat because it didn't seem strictly on the level on account of not having a horse. Without the bowler, though, she was just as honest as Mr. Jerry Seymour, who had been all togged out for horseback when he was only taking a walk.

As luck would have it, the dogs dashed up just as she was getting in the car and jostled in ahead of her. Irately she administered sound whacks on their impervious rumps, but they just sat down on them and wouldn't budge. She pushed and shoved to no avail. "They're nailed to the seat," she concluded and drove off with their huge heads resting companionably on her shoulders. "Please stop slobbering down my neck," she implored them.

They couldn't help slobbering. It was a brisk morning and they felt happy. When she drew up in front of the little brown house they tumbled out of the car and flung themselves upon Mr. Jerry Seymour in exuberant good will. He staggered backwards, shielding his face from their cordial kisses. "They're very friendly," Claudia assured him. "I had to bring them because they wanted to come."

It was gratifying to see his astonishment. Had he been a less dignified person he would have goggled. "Why, it's you!" he exclaimed incredulously. "You look so different."

Claudia wanted to say that it was probably on account of wearing a couple of Great Danes and her sister-in-law's hand-me-downs, but she thought it best to explain about "Sad Ecstasy" before she lost her courage. She had to talk loud and fast because the dogs were barking and the wind was blowing.

"So I'm frightfully sorry," she finished breathlessly, "and I want to apologise. But, of course," she added, "you were pretty nasty and you brought it on yourself. Shut up, Bluster! Get down, Bluff!"

Mr. Jerry Seymour looked bewildered. "I don't understand," he said flatly. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Claudia Naughton—Here!" she broke off and threw a stick, and the dogs scurried after it like great idiots.

"But surely—" In the blessed interlude of peace and silence he lowered his voice to normal and stared at her. "But surely you're not the wife of—"

"I didn't say I was. You said I was."

She saw his faint smile coming and she liked it. "You must have thought I was pretty much of a damned fool," he said humbly.

"Oh, I did."

"Of course," he added sternly, "I think *you're* pretty much of —a—a—"

"Louse," she supplied gravely. "I don't like the word. but it does it."

"Louse," he acknowledged, "to pull the cheap sort of a trick of listening in on a telephone conversation."

"It's a vice," confided Claudia. "I can't help it."

"Now if you were a writer," he reproved her severely, "there might be some excuse for it."

Her face lighted up. "Oh, do you do it, too?"

"It's part of my profession," he said coldly, with that nice smile still hovering around his lips.

"It's part of my profession, too," she said. "I'm an actress."

"Are you really? I wonder have I seen you? What's your stage name?"

"The same as my real name," she admitted.

"I see—"

"Don't you dare make fun of me," she flared. "I'm good!"

"I damned well know you're good. Look here, I'm catching pneumonia out here, come inside—"

"Oh, no—the dogs—they've gone up the road—good-bye, and thanks for being so nice about it all—"

"Wait a minute!" His long legs caught up with her. "I'm not in the least nice about it. I'm going to make a hell of a row—"

"The dogs—"

"They'll come back, Heaven forbid—"

She turned on him indignantly. "Don't you like them? Don't you think they're gorgeous?"

"Yes and no."

"You're afraid of big dogs," she accused him scornfully, "and I bet you twenty cents you bite your fingernails."

He was outraged. "If you were a man, I'd knock you down for that! Look here, do come inside for a minute, I want to talk to you."

"Oh, but I wouldn't dream of interrupting your work. Didn't you rent this little house to get away from it all?"

"Would you like me to carry you in?" ("He's a little like David," she thought with a small thrill of surprise.)

"No," she said hastily, "I wouldn't. Good-bye."

"But you can't get away with what you've done!"

"I haven't done anything."

"Yes, you have. You've disturbed me—tremendously."

She felt her heart pound. There was a note in his voice that made her shivery.

"You must atone by coming to dinner with me tonight," he pursued.

"I can't, it's impossible."

"Why?"

"I have chops all bought."

"Invite me to your house, then."

She shook her head. "There aren't enough."

"I'll bring my own chop. I'll cook it myself. I'm a very remarkable cook."

"Bertha wouldn't like you messing up her kitchen."

"Then tomorrow night. I'll make you some chicken cacciatori. You never tasted anything like it."

"I'm not hungry—"

"If you don't eat anything until then, you will be——"

"Why do you want me?" she asked him suddenly.

He seemed taken aback. "Because—I don't know. Why the hell *do* I?"

She knew the answer, but she didn't tell him. She told David. Standing there with Mr. Jerry Seymour shivering in the cold and not even knowing he was cold she sent David a telepathic message: "Oh, David, I've got sex!"

When he called up that evening she'd have given anything in the world to pour out the whole story from beginning to end. But she could only go so far as to say she had a trade-last for him.

"What is it?"

"I said 'last'."

"I can't think of any long distance."

"Oh, you can't. can't you— Well, somebody thinks your wife is tremendously disturbing."

There was a little silence. "Who?"

"I'll tell you when you come home."

"Oh. What's my trade-last?"

"That was it."

There was another silence.

"Listen," she reminded him. "We ought to be talking. It's extravagant not to be——"

"I'm thinking," said David. "How do you feel?" he queried abruptly.

"Simply marvellous!"

"You sound as if you were pining away for me."

"Don't be silly, I miss you frightfully. I can't wait till you get back."

"That's better. Oh, by the way. I mightn't call tomorrow night."

"I'm certainly glad you told me. I might have waited in."

He laughed. It didn't occur to her until after she'd hung up the receiver that he probably thought that she was joking. It didn't occur to her either, that he'd have the slightest objection to her having dinner with Mr. Jerry Seymour, because, for goodness sake, they weren't living in the Dark Ages—they were perfectly modern people.

It was Fritz, oddly enough, who seemed to object. He didn't say anything about it, but he looked funny when Claudia presented herself at the kitchen door the following evening. "I'll be where you picked me up the other day, Fritz, in case anything turns up with Bobby. You'll keep a good eye on him, won't you, Bertha?"

"Ach, of course!" cried Bertha. "You're looking beautiful, Miss Claudia. It's pants, not?"

"Pyjamas. Hostess pyjamas. Miss Julia brought them to me from Paris last year. I've never had a chance to wear them before. How do they look, really?"

"Beautiful!" insisted Bertha, ardently. "Isn't it, Fritz?"

Fritz was getting into his coat. "I'm taking you," he announced firmly.

"Nonsense, I can drive myself."

"Mr. David wouldn't want it. I call for you at ten o'clock."

"But I mightn't be ready to come home."

"I wait, then," said Fritz inexorably. "Out front."

"Fritz is right," Bertha put in.

"You both make me sick," said Claudia with affection. "You'd think I was an imbecile, or something. How do I smell, Bertha?"

Bertha sniffed. "Luffly."

"Twenty-seven dollars a bottle."

Bertha's eyes bulged.

"But I didn't buy it," Claudia amended.

Bertha nodded wisely. "I know," she said. "Miss Julia."

Mr. Jerry Seymour thought the pyjamas were stunning, too, and he noticed the perfume right away. Claudia, however, did not divulge their origin. This was her party, exclusively; she was entirely on her own merits and she wasn't going to trade on being related to Julia, whose picture had been in the rotogravure section of the *Times* only last Sunday as sponsor of something or other. Julia, having arrived at the age when she had to have all of her important organs removed, was going in for big social movements instead, and Claudia had no doubt that Mr. Jerry Seymour would recognise her name at once, and be impressed accordingly.

The little room looked very cosy in the lamplight, with a small

table set before the fireplace. He had moved the desk against the wall and Claudia noticed, for the first time, a large divan heaped with pillows. She could never resist a divan. She plopped upon it, bouncing. "This is the softest thing," she exulted.

He looked down at her, smiling. "I'm glad you like it," he said. "I sleep there," he added.

She was surprised. "No bedroom?"

"Two bedrooms, but no heat in them. and in this way, you see, I have only one room to take care of."

She glanced around approvingly. "You're a very tidy person for a man."

"Aren't the men you know tidy?"

"I should say not," said Claudia, thinking of David, who was clean as wax, but pretty much of a desk-piler.

He brought her a cocktail. "To us, then——"

She sipped it and made a face.

"Don't you care for it?"

"It tastes like hair tonic," she told him candidly.

"Sophisticate. I'll get you some straight whisky."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. She wondered why he called her sophisticate. Usually it was just the opposite when you didn't drink.

The dinner was delicious. She'd never known a man who could cook, except Roger Killian. As for David, he couldn't scramble an egg without making a mess of it.

She ate heartily. He couldn't get over it. He said, a little baffled, "My God, but you've got an appetite."

"Why not?" said Claudia cheerfully. "I'm a very uninhibited person. Do you think I should stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Eating."

"By no means. Don't stop anything." His eyes were smiling deeply. "Keep on being just as you are. You're perfect."

She was really pleased. She was almost certain that David would like him, for, as they sat at the table, dawdling over the fruit and cheese (which was a little disappointing as dessert, though impeccably correct), she discussed with him many of David's pet subjects. Glands, for one thing.

She said thoughtfully, "I should think you were a hyperthyroid."

He said he was; he was even taking pills for it, but how on earth did she know it?

"All hyperthyroids listen over the telephone. I don't take pills, though."

He laughed. "You don't need any pills. What else do you know?"

"I'm a farmer. I know all about pigs and chickens and cows and bulls."

"I say, you are extraordinary! Actress, farmer, hyperthyroid—"

"Medium and sophisticate, don't forget."

"I haven't," he rejoined, and only his lips smiled.

He lifted the table and carried it into the kitchen. She followed. "I'll wash, you dry——"

"No dishes tonight, tomorrow maybe."

"Do you think I'm going to come in and do day work for you?" she demanded pertly.

For answer he took her in his arms. She almost fell over with surprise, for she had no idea he liked her as much as all that. She pushed him away.

"Listen, don't," she said.

"Why not?"

His voice was terribly low. "You're the most exciting thing that's happened to me in years," he told her.

"For goodness sake!" she said. She could hardly believe he was the same man she'd met on the road two days ago. She hadn't been sure, then, that he'd been made of flesh and blood. There was no doubt of it, now. He was as warm and human as could be. Almost too much so, for his face was very close to hers and he was whispering, "You're beautiful, everything about you is beautiful, your mind, your body, the very quality of your being——"

She gasped a little. David was crazy about her, but he had always said she was not beautiful or bright. Her estimation of herself went up a hundred per cent. She would tell him a thing or two when he came back. for if practically a stranger could feel that way about her, it was an insult for one's husband to feel the very opposite. David was evidently too used to her, he simply took her for granted, which was death to any marriage.

"Claudia——"

It was the first time he'd called her by her name. She couldn't help liking the way he said it. "Yes?" she breathed.

"You know what I'm trying to say," he whispered. "You're so utterly desirable——"

Desirable. That was a new one. She wasn't quite certain what was in his mind, but of course it couldn't be—it was absurd. She was a little ashamed of having such thoughts, but just the same, things like that often happened in the newspapers, and she wished it were time to go home. She tried to look at her watch, but

his arm was in the way and, as she attempted to squirm free of it, closed in upon her, and his lips were pressing down on hers and he was saying that he loved her.

"Hey!" she cried. "Stop that!"

"Why should I stop?"

"Because I don't like it!" she answered smartly. "I don't like it at all, so let me go, please!"

"Vixen—adorable vixen——"

Vixen. Definitely she was a vixen. "I'll bite!" she threatened.

"Marvellous—" he said, with a kind of trembly laughter in his voice. He apparently didn't believe that she was furious. She was more than furious, she was scared, for by this time things were going from bad to worse. Then all at once, the sound of a motor broke the night and a blinding glare of headlights swept over them. Fritz! Claudia sent up a prayer of thankfulness as a car drew to a stop outside. "Oh, God, thanks loads. I'd have simply died!"

But it wasn't Fritz. Before she could gather her senses, the car door slammed, there were quick, firm steps on the porch and with one stride David stood on the threshold of the living-room.

You could have knocked Claudia over with a feather. "David!" she exclaimed on a little squeal of complete astonishment. "I had no idea you'd be back tonight!"

"Evidently you didn't," said David.

She looked at him. He didn't sound in the least natural and he didn't look natural, either. He just stood planked in the doorway with his nostrils wiggling, and his face absolutely white and set. "What on earth is the matter with you!" she cried in alarm. "Don't you feel well?"

"I feel swell," said David in the bitterest voice she'd ever heard. "Get your coat on and come home."

Then Jerry Seymour spoke. She'd forgotten all about Jerry. He said, quite angrily, "Who is this man?"

As Claudia started to explain that it was David, David broke in with a short laugh, "I'm her husband."

"Husband?" Jerry echoed in amazement. "I didn't know she had any!"

David's nostrils wiggled more than ever and his Adam's apple moved but no sound came over it.

"This is the image of a movie," thought Claudia. "I've got myself in an awful pickle."

She turned to her host. "I told you I wasn't married to Fritz——"

"But you neglected to tell me you were married to anybody else!"

Now Jerry's nostrils were wiggling. Instead of raging at each other, they both seemed to have directed their anger against her.

"I'm sorry," she apologised in a cold, hard voice. "I naturally took it for granted that you knew there must be David——"

"Why?" he boomed at her. "Why should I take such a thing for granted when you come here——"

"That's enough," David cut in, with much too much control for safety.

"She's dynamite!" Jerry's voice shook with rage. "She's given me one hell of a two days!"

For the first time, the set look wavered around David's lips. "I shouldn't be surprised," he said. "Claudia, get your coat on."

She picked up her light velvet cape and flung it over her shoulders. Her cheeks were burning. She walked straight to Jerry Seymour. "I'm terribly sorry my husband is behaving like this."

"I don't think I blame him," Jerry said.

Claudia lost her temper. "You two seem to understand each other perfectly!"

"We do," said David curtly. "Come along."

She shook his masterful hand off her shoulder, refusing to be dragged away like a naughty child. At least she'd make her exit in her own way and take her time about it. She held out her hand. "Thank you, anyway, for asking me, Mr. Seymour. The chicken was delicious."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," said Jerry. "But please don't come again."

Once outdoors, David was as nasty as could be. He held the car door open for her, closed it, and went around to the other side and took his seat without saying a word.

Claudia said in a small voice, "You haven't kissed me hello yet."

David made no reply. His profile was illuminated by the small light on the dashboard. It looked hard and remote, and somehow tragic. A lump came into Claudia's throat. "David," she said softly, "you aren't really angry, are you?"

"I'm not angry, I only feel as if I'd been knocked on the head——"

"But why? Nobody knocked you on the head."

"Don't be funny," he burst out hoarsely.

"I'm not being funny. I'm terribly disappointed in you, if you must know the truth. I always thought you were about the most noble man in the world."

"Well, you've got another think coming," he assured her shortly, "and the sooner you learn you can't make a monkey out of me the better off we'll be."

"Why, David, the last thing I wanted to do was to make a monkey out of you! As a matter of fact, if I hadn't loved you so much, I'd never have bothered to make myself attractive to Jerry Seymour."

The car slowed up, as if it were pulling itself away under David's slackening hands. "So you did it for my sake!" he expostulated.

"Yes. I did. And you ought to be delighted at the way it turned out. Jerry actually said he was in love with me. Now does that make you feel like a million dollars, or doesn't it?"

She lurched forward as the car came to an unpremeditated halt.

"So he's in love with you!"

"Don't shout, please. I'm right next to you."

"I'll shout as much as I please. Are you in love with him?"

"Don't be silly."

"Answer me!"

"David, you're hurting me!"

"Answer me, I said!"

"Why—I honestly think you're jealous," she exclaimed in wonder. "And all these years me thinking you were perfect——"

"So you are in love with him," said David in a still voice.

"Oh, don't be silly," she said again. "I didn't carry on like a lunatic when Victoria Manners was crazy about you——"

"I wasn't in love with Victoria Manners," said David in a tired-sounding way. "You didn't happen to come in a room and find us in each other's arms."

"Oh!" cried Claudia, much enlightened. "Did you see us?"

He made no reply. He put the car into gear and they slid off again. "I'm not blaming you," he said, more gently. "He's a good-looking chap and I've left you to lead a pretty quiet, lonely life out here."

He didn't go on. Claudia wanted to weep. He was hurt, deep inside of him and there wasn't anything she could do to help him not to be hurt. She could say, of course, "I don't love Jerry Seymour any more than I love the man in the moon, and the only loneliness I know is when you're away from me." But it would be just words. That would be all right for some people, but not for David and herself. They had never used words before. They had just known things without saying them.

The tears were wet upon her cheeks. She hated to see him suffer. Yet she wouldn't have had any respect for him if he weren't suffering. After all, you can't find your wife in another

man's arms and not feel some reaction. "I'm glad he's not noble," she told herself firmly. "I couldn't stand being married to a noble man."

She glanced up at him. No, he wasn't a bit noble. His face looked as if it were carved out of the side of a stone ledge. "I'm cold," she said suddenly, and indeed her teeth were chattering.

He slowed up the car and with one arm reached over the back of the seat for her old brown coat. He slid it across her shoulders, still with one hand on the wheel, still not looking at her. It was as if the spirit of their marriage were dead, but part of it went on just the same.

"Thanks," she said softly.

The old brown coat felt warm and comfortable, like a friend. She slipped her hands down into the commodious, welcoming pockets. Her fingers touched something small and chill. She drew it out. The pipe scraper! She'd forgotten all about it, she hadn't thought of it from the day she'd found it until this very second.

"David!"

There was command in her voice. He turned towards her.

"Stop the car, please."

"No, I want to get home."

"But I've got something to tell you."

He covered her hand for an instant. "You don't have to," he said. "It's all right, whatever happened—whatever didn't happen—it's all right because—well, because it's you and it has to be all right."

"Oh, David—" She felt choked up. "That's wonderful, I'm glad that's the way it is," she said. "Though, of course," she added practically, "it's silly because nothing happened absolutely, I mean not even in my mind it didn't happen. But stop the car, anyway, it's important!"

He stopped the car. She reached up and turned on the top light which, for a wonder, worked.

"Look," she said, and held out her hand.

David looked. A smile of incredulous pleasure overspread his face. "My pipe scraper—Where'd you find it?"

"Never mind where I found it. Aren't you going to kiss me for it?"

He reached up and put out the light. The night was cold, and dark, and beautiful, and on a nearby tree a bird chirped sleepily, resentfully.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GREATER WISDOM

"I COULD kill that bank," Claudia wrathfully declared. "It's made a mistake again." She shuffled the pile of cancelled cheques into its yellow envelope and snapped the rubber band around it. "Honestly," she said, "that's the limit. A hundred and two dollars and two cents, their favour."

David lowered the evening paper a fraction of an inch and turned his head barely a fraction of an inch toward the desk. "Banks," he said a trifle wearily, "never make mistakes. I told you that the last time."

Claudia bridled. "That's right. Take their part against your wife."

"Banks," repeated David emphatically, "*can't* make a mistake."

"Oh, are they God?"

"They use adding machines."

"All right," she flared, "I use a washing machine and your shirt had the same spot on it this week as last."

David's patience ebbed. "Don't be a jack. If their books don't balance at the end of a day, if they're so much as one cent out of the way, they sit up all night to find the error."

"Then they do make errors!"

"They do not."

"Then why do they sit up all night?"

"Claudia, for God's sake! I'm reading something important. Go over your figures again and find your mistake."

"I've been over them at least ten times."

He blew through his lips and rose from the sofa. Claudia forgot her grievance against the bank and said, "Oh, my, look at you." Then she doubled with laughter. Shakespeare was shedding and his long yellow hair was plastered all over the back of David's blue suit like a racoon coat.

David glowered at himself over his shoulder. "Damn that cat, why can't she be kept in the barn?"

"He," corrected Claudia automatically. Even after all these years it was hard to remember what Shakespeare really was. "You're very unjust. The only pleasure the poor darling has left in life is to lose his fur."

Shakespeare, sensing his importance, emerged from beneath the big wing chair, and, using his front and rear claws as anchorage in the thick carpet, stretched himself into a luxurious arc.

"See," Claudia pointed out, "he's getting the rugs all full of him, too, and I'm not making a fuss."

"You don't have to wear the rug down to business. Blast you, cat, stop that!" But Shakespeare, not knowing what side his bread was buttered on, continued to sidle affectionately against David's trousers and then, turning around, sidled back in the opposite direction. David held out one dark-blue leg. "Look at that!"

"You ought to change to a bungalow apron when you come home nights," suggested Claudia and giggled until she hiccupped.

David didn't see what was so funny about it. "Get the hell out of here," he shouted and brought the toe of his shoe into firm contact with Shakespeare's surprised behind.

"Why David," Claudia exclaimed aghast. "You kicked him!"

"Yes; and I'll kick him again if he comes near me."

Shocked and incredulous, she stopped to lift Shakespeare into the protective circle of her arms, but he eluded her haughtily and wafted into the dining-room, swishing his tail in offended insolence.

"I feel," Claudia announced dramatically, "as if I were married to a stranger."

"Oh shut up," said David, struggling ineffectively to pick off the long clinging strands of fur. "I didn't hurt your damned cat."

"It's your cat as much as mine."

"Not when she sheds."

"He. Besides, the dogs shed all over the place, too — only maybe you think dog-shed is more manly than cat-shed."

"The dogs' brush off. This damned stuff sticks like glue. Don't you ever clean your house?"

"Bertha spends her day vacuuming. Really, David, I don't think you feel well."

He jerked away from her.

"Stop tickling me."

"I'm not tickling you."

"Well, I haven't a fever, if that's what you're after. I never felt better."

"Then what's the matter with you? You've been awfully touchy lately."

"Is it too much to ask for a man to come home and read his paper in peace?"

She stiffened. "Very well, then, never mind helping me with my balance, I'll just write and tell the bank they made a mistake."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Let me see your figures."

He sat down at the desk and opened her cheque book, and immediately became disagreeable. "What do you keep in here, a diary? *Telephone Mamma reg. pillows—Bobby sox—What does this mean? Ded. 2 dr. cl. no pants.*"

"I don't know," Claudia admitted, studying the entry. "Whatever it was though, it's important. It'll come to me."

"Get yourself a notebook," he advised curtly. "What's this figure, three or five?"

"Three—are you blind?"

"Why don't you make your threes look like threes? Where're your cancelled cheques?"

"You don't have to teach me how to write. In front of your nose."

"Here, I thought so. Number 689, made out to Eastbrook Grain Company for thirty-five dollars. It was a five. That's one of your mistakes. You added it for a three."

"For goodness sake, aren't you clever?" she congratulated him. "But the bank still happens to be a hundred dollars and some cents out of the way. Don't forget that, pray."

"Shush," said David, running his pencil up and down the columns.

She looked virtuous. "Remember it wasn't a mistake in addition that I made, it was a mistake in reading. Anybody could do that. But in adding and subtracting I'm perfect."

David snorted. "Come over here. What's nine from thirteen?"

"Where?"

"There. Just where my pencil is."

Claudia thought swiftly. The only thing to do was to stick up for herself. "Six," she said brazenly.

"Count it on your fingers. Go on, nine from——"

"Well, maybe it's four."

"Maybe nothing! It *is* four!"

"All right then, it's four; which makes a difference of two tiny little pennies and you go into fits over it. Why, I should think you'd be ashamed."

"I should be ashamed!" he expostulated.

"Well it isn't a crime, is it, to make a mistake of two cents?"

"Stop gabbing. Forty-eight, fifty-three, fifty-eight—Can't you make out anything else but five dollar cheques?" he broke off disgustedly.

"What's the matter with five-dollar cheques?"

"It costs the bank money every time a cheque is put through. Draw a cheque for twenty-five dollars and be done with it."

"I have my own system," she informed him with dignity. "Please don't interfere with the way I do things, and stop worrying about the bank losing money. They can afford to lose money if they make mistakes for themselves of a hundred dollars."

He looked harricd. "Could you manage to keep your mouth shut for just one minute? Three from two is nine—borrow one—here, you forgot to borrow one—wait a minute, no, you didn't—"

"I never forget to borrow one," said Claudia morally.

David scratched his head. "I can't seem to find where you slipped up."

She smiled with all the smile she could smile. "I should think that bank would be so red in the face——"

"A bank doesn't have to get red in the face!" David exploded violently. "Look here, get it in your head once and for all, a bank doesn't make mistakes!"

"That's marvellous logic. There's a hundred dollars missing and you admit the error isn't mine."

"I admit nothing of the sort."

"You said all the figures added up right."

"Get the vouchers again. Read them off to me."

She read them off. Everything went along swimmingly; each cancelled cheque found its stub dutifully marked with a fancy circle in Claudia's best manner, until she came to two cheques stuck together, and one of the cheques was made out to Fritz for a hundred dollars.

"You haven't entered it," said David.

"Oh, don't be silly, I must have!"

He pushed the book toward her. "Then find it, my love."

"Don't my love me." She shuffled through the pages nervously. It was coming back to her—she remembered now—when she was in New York at the beginning of the month, she'd made out a cheque for Fritz and Bertha's salary because their daughter needed it in a hurry to have a baby with. Then she'd forgotten all about entering it in the book when she'd returned to Eastbrook.

"It must be here," she mumbled. "I'm sure it is—I simply couldn't have forgotten——"

"Well, you did forget," said David rising. He picked up his paper.

"David, don't begin to read yet. Something terrible has happened."

He looked crucified. "What now?"

"Well, on account of you finding out that the bank didn't make a mistake, my balance is only twenty-three dollars instead of a hundred and twenty-three."

"Naturally," he said.

"But don't you see? I'll need more to get through the month."

She wasn't prepared for the way he took it. Usually he was the most generous person in the world. In the rare times that she'd needed extra money she had hardly had to ask for it. And occasionally he'd toss her a cheque for fifty or sixty dollars out of a clear blue sky and say, "Here, Skinnymalink, blow yourself to a new dress." But now his face took on a certain set expression that she'd never seen before, and he said, "Look here, Claudia, that isn't as easy as it sounds."

"What isn't?"

"Hundred-dollar bills don't grow on trees any more. How'd you happen to run short?" He picked up the cheque book once more and skimmed through it briefly. She peered over his shoulder.

"There wasn't anything really extra last month, except that big veterinary bill and my fare into New York to the dentist the time we didn't drive—I have to go tomorrow, too—by the way, David, did we get poor all at once?"

He lit his pipe. The way he tamped his tobacco made her know that something was wrong. "Ever heard the word depression?"

"Yes, but we weren't married then, so it didn't depress me."

"Well, we're in another one. Not such a big flashy one, but it's got a punch behind it, anyway."

"Oh, heavens," she said. "When did that one come?"

"It's been here quite a while."

"And it's hit us?"

"It's hit everybody."

A light dawned in Claudia's grey-green eyes. "I bet you twenty cents that's why the Riddles didn't build their play-wing. Remember they wanted you to design it, but you didn't want to be that kind of an architect, you wanted to build a great cathedral or something."

"I remember," said David tersely.

"I guess they aren't building so many cathedrals these days either," Claudia observed.

"Smart girl. Go to the head of the class."

"David, don't be horrid. I'm quite upset, really I am."

"Nonsense. We'll scrape together that hundred dollars. Don't worry about it."

"Don't be silly. I'm not upset on account of money. I'm only upset because you're upset."

"I'm not upset," said David, looking vastly unconcerned.

"Oh, no," said Claudia. "It's your natural nature, I suppose, to kick the cat. Why on earth didn't you tell me before, instead of letting me think you were still harbouring a secret jealousy of Jerry Seymour?"

He grinned. "Disappointed?"

"A little. He went back last week."

"How do you know?"

"I asked the butcher. Meat's gone up. David, you should have told me about the depression."

"What for? There's nothing you can do about it."

"Well, I could at least do my own housework and cooking, the same as a million other women. Except," she added, "that it would mean letting Fritz and Bertha go when they've been so faithful."

"Bertha and Fritz stay," said David with his jaw squaring up. "They've worked like slaves to help us build this place, and in another year or two, when we can afford to put some money into the barns and substitute pure-bred stock for grade stock, we'll try to make it pay its way instead of eating its head off."

"The animals do eat a lot more than we do," said Claudia hesitantly. "Have you noticed?"

"Sure I noticed—it's hell."

"But nice hell," Claudia modified.

"Swell hell," he fervently agreed.

"Still, it isn't cheap to live on a farm, no matter what anybody thinks about getting so much milk for nothing."

"Want to move back to New York?"

Her heart turned sick. "Oh, must we, David?"

He took her in his arms. "No, we musn't. Not while I've got any fight left in me."

"But I want to help," she whispered.

"I was afraid of that."

"I suppose you think I couldn't help. I suppose you think I have no head for business?"

"I think you have no head at all."

She was outraged. "Did I or did I not sell this house for twice what it cost us?"

"And did I or did I not almost get into a lawsuit trying to unsell it?" he demanded.

"Well, anyway, I bet I could make a success if I sold antiques in the barn or started kennels or something."

"I bet you could," he agreed hastily. "Only don't. Just let's go on living peacefully the way we are."

"But, David, if we've got no money——"

"We've got a few securities."

"What kind?"

"Good sound investments," he answered evasively.

"Oh," she said. "I see."

"What do you see?"

She picked up the paper he had been reading and glanced at the headlines: STOCKS SWEEP DOWNWARD IN RISING PANIC. "Is that where we have our good sound investments?"

David did not answer directly. "You have a very discomfoting way," he remarked, "of not only making a point but driving the point home."

"In other words," said Claudia, "you're never certain of just how dumb I really am—and I never," she added in a burst of honesty, "am really certain myself—if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said David. "I've known for years."

She went over the marketing list with Bertha before leaving for town the next morning. "Let's change our idea of steak for tonight," she said. "We'll buy some breast of lamb for stew." (Breast of lamb came by the yard and only cost twelve cents a pound.)

"We buy nothing," Bertha decreed. "I make a good crust and we grind everything in the ice-box and roll it in."

One thing led to another, and it developed that Bertha knew all about the depression, for two of her sons-in-law were out of jobs. She also said that Fritz and she had been talking it over, and they both thought that eighty dollars, instead of a hundred, were very good wages for a couple in these times.

Claudia was deeply touched. "Mr. David wouldn't hear of it," she said. "And neither would I. You're practically a quartet and worth twice what you get."

Then Bertha became deeply touched and wiped her eyes on the corner of her apron, and said she'd do the sheets at home, it was nonsense to send them out.

Claudia told David about it in the car. "There are certainly

some lovely Germans left in the world," she said. "Aren't there?"

He said there were. He didn't seem to feel much like talking, so Claudia looked out of the window and was amazed to register for the first time all the signs that hung outside of nice little white houses — *Lamp Shades—Stop for Tea—Cocker Spaniels, Ped. Stock—Overnight Rooms—Hand-Made Rugs—Home-Made Goodies*—— It was funny, she reflected how you stayed asleep to things until you woke up to them.

It was the same all through the day. It was just as if she walked around New York with her eyes open for the first time. She entered the dentist's office and noticed that the girl who usually sat at the desk in the foyer wasn't there any longer. She wondered if she were home ill, or if Dr. Martin had suddenly decided that he didn't need anyone to answer the telephone. His appointment book was lying open and she couldn't help seeing that all that was written in it was her own name and lunch and one other name. "Oh, dear," she thought, "he's hit, too."

When he worked over her, this morning, she missed his whistle. He just filled her mouth with everything under the sun and walked away and left her. In a little while he came back and asked her how the weather was in the country.

"Ungh," she said wetly.

Then he took everything out of her mouth one by one and said, "Bite."

"High," said Claudia, gnashing her teeth.

He began to grind. When he'd finally polished off the inlay, he pumped her down to sea-level and said, "That third molar of yours could stand some work, Claudia." He called her Claudia because he'd known her ever since she was a little girl. David still kept his own dentist, also, which was funny considering how intimate they were in practically everything else, but a dentist was like religion when it came to changing. "First one that dies we'll go to the other one," they arranged compatibly.

Now Claudia said in dismay, "Oh, can't the molar wait?" She felt like a dog as far as Dr. Martin was concerned, but she simply couldn't sprout out in gold inlays when David was so short of money.

Dr. Martin said that if it didn't bother her, it probably could. He didn't even ask the reason why. He seemed to know, and they parted with a strange sense of mutual understanding. He patted Claudia's shoulder, and in return she offered hopefully, "David'll be along one of these days." She didn't wish any harm

to David's dentist, but he was much the older of the two and it was only fair.

She had intended to do some shopping after leaving Dr. Martin's office. She needed a girdle and some everyday night-gowns, but the old girdle would do with some new garters, and David could jolly well share his pyjamas with her, whether he liked her in them or not. She could roll them up like blue jeans.

"I'll go straight up to Mamma's," she thought.

She waited for a bus. Two buses passed her by. She was wild. It was all she could do not to shake her fist after them. Then she discovered that she was standing on the wrong corner. "Very well, if you want to be so fussy about details, I'll walk," she decided in a huff. It was a new and not unpleasant experience to realise that by so doing she was actually saving ten cents.

Mrs. Brown was waiting for her daughter expectantly. Her rooms were pleasant, with two windows, and the hotel was wonderful to her, she always said.

"If you were my mother-in-law I'd have brought you a present," Claudia greeted her. "It was very considerate of David not to give me a mother-in-law, wasn't it? My goodness, why don't you have some pictures of your grandson around? How do you feel?"

"Fine. I'm having the last one framed. I've got his little sweater finished, don't forget to take it with you."

"Oh, nice." (Why are home-made sweaters always so baggy?)

"How's David?"

"Fine. Look, I'm not going to stay for lunch, I have to pay a duty call on Julia, but I'll take a cracker or something, she never eats until after one and I couldn't last that long."

She was already exploring the ice-box in the tiny kitchenette. There was something about its contents that tore at her heart. It was such a lonely little ice-box. A small bottle of ketchup, two oranges, a quarter-pound of butter, some canned tomatoes in a covered jar, and a cooked chop.

"Why didn't you eat your chop last night?" she demanded, as she returned to the living-room with the canned tomatoes.

"I had too big a supper," Mrs. Brown lied. "Gracious, are you going to eat those cold tomatoes?"

"I adore them this way," said Claudia, spooning them out with relish. "Slob," she adjured herself, as she spilled a little. "Never mind, it won't show on tweed, it'll just look like more tweed. Listen, why don't you drive home with us this evening?"

"I just came back from visiting you."

"Supposing?"

"I'd wear out my welcome. Next week I may run out for a day or two."

"Has the tailor finished your new coat? I'm anxious to see it."

"I never ordered it," said Mrs. Brown. "I decided that for the little I go out my old coat would do perfectly well."

"Oh," said Claudia. "I'd no idea—I mean—" She paused. What she really meant to say was, "How can the depression hit anyone who hasn't a profession or a business?"

"My dividends have been cut," Mrs. Brown casually explained. "I didn't want to worry you and David about it. I can manage beautifully."

"Oh," said Claudia again. She smiled brightly. "We're busted, too."

She was grateful because her mother accepted the statement without astonishment or question. She said merely, "I've a little money put aside in the savings bank if David needs it."

"Don't be an idiot," said Claudia, to hide her feelings.

"Don't *you* be an idiot," said Mrs. Brown. "It's there in case of emergency."

Claudia felt a lump in her throat when she left. Her mother wasn't spectacular—she was just a widow, who had raised a daughter without incurring too many difficulties or deprivations. She didn't work for her living, or belong to clubs, or contribute vastly to the progress of the nation. But Claudia realised more keenly than ever before the simple beautiful courage of a soul fulfilling its humble destiny. She realised, too, with a tug of anguish, that her mother was getting old. Her hair had turned in the last months from grey to white, and there was a quality of age in the way she walked. "She didn't follow me into the kitchen," Claudia thought.

There was a little florist shop on the corner. She didn't know what made her do it, but she stepped in and selected a dozen gorgeous yellow roses and printed her mother's name in camouflage, and warned the florist not to remember who had sent them in case Mrs. Brown inquired. "Or say an elderly man sent them," she amended smiling. "Perhaps," it occurred to her "an elderly man really did send them." It was years since she had thought about her father.

Thinking about him made her think of David. There was a telephone in the rear of the store. It wasn't a booth, but, even so, she couldn't wait to hear his voice.

"Hello, darling——"

"Hello, dear——"

It would have been enough then, just to say good-bye and ring off, because she knew that he was alive, and that he loved her and they belonged together. He asked her if she wanted anything and she said, foolishly, "I just bought a dozen yellow roses with extra long stems and sent them to Mamma."

"Swell," said David. He added quickly, "She isn't ill, is she?"

"No, she just looked tired."

"Then that was nice," David said. She thrilled to think that he didn't examine the gesture and that he didn't imply, as a great many husbands might have implied, that sending flowers to a person who wasn't sick or didn't have a birthday was a needless extravagance.

The radiance of loving him was still upon her when she entered Julia's boudoir a short while later. The room always reminded Claudia of a stage set, with its bayed windows and open fireplace, flanked by chaise-longues on either side. Julia lay on one of them and managed to look tailored, even in a long *négligée*, which zipped up the middle straight to her ears. The sleeves zipped, too, right to a point half-way down her long, slender hands. She smelled marvellous, as always. Claudia sniffed appreciatively, as she bent to place a dutiful peck on Julia's cheek.

Julia wasn't ill, exactly, but she had apparently not become adapted to living without her organs and, since her operation, she had to rest in the morning if she went out in the afternoon, or rest in the afternoon if she wanted to go out in the evening, or go to bed early if she had been out during the day. Personally, Claudia thought she'd have been better off without the operation, and as for David, he had always said that all Julia needed was less aristocracy, more sex, and a good kick in the pants. But, of course, Hartley was hardly the person to incorporate any of these improvements. He was much too busy with his own blood pressure.

"My dear," said Julia, "you look bursting with health."

Claudia felt almost abashed at being so full of vitality. She established herself on the opposite chaise. "I'm mad about this room," she said.

"It is sweet," Julia agreed disinterestedly. "We're closing up the house, you know."

"Oh, no. Why?"

Julia shrugged. "Hard times. We simply can't afford to run it. We're taking a suite at the Plaza."

"Oh," said Claudia. She wondered how far one could cut down in a suite at the Plaza.

"Don't tell me David hasn't felt it."

Some instinct impelled Claudia to minimise, rather than stress the uncertain state of their finances. It was not only a sense of pride that held her back, but an odd feeling that people ought not to build up this hysteria of depression. "Oh, we're going on pretty much as usual," she said.

Fortunately, lunch appeared at that moment, wheeled in on a table full of silver-coloured dishes, with two maids in attendance. They both had blonde hair and flat faces, and looked expensively Scandinavian in cocoa-coloured uniforms.

"I hope you don't mind eating up here," Julia said. "I'm not too good at stairs yet."

Claudia, figuratively rubbing her hands and tucking her napkin under her chin, didn't mind at all. She smiled expansively at the maids and said "Hello." Although they had been with Julia for years they didn't seem to expect to be said hello to, but Claudia would have felt uncomfortable if she hadn't. "I'd rather do it and have it wrong than not to do it and have it right," she determined. She wondered what they would do for a job after they left Julia's employ; what the chef and butler would do——

"Did you hear about George Riddle?" Julia broke in upon her reflections.

"No, what? I was talking about the Riddles last night."

"He was found dead this morning in his apartment. Suicide."

Claudia gave a little cry of shock and horror. "Oh, he was such a nice little man. Why did he do such a thing?"

"Financial troubles, of course."

"But he was rich. They were always giving parties."

"It was Nancy's money these last years. It's ghastly for her. Fortunately he carried a large insurance."

Claudia had to stop eating suddenly. "Poor Mrs. Riddle. What good is insurance without a husband?"

"It might help," said Julia dryly.

"Not me, it wouldn't." Her heart was sick. Suppose it had been David? Suppose it had been Hartley? There was no telling what men would do when they were driven.

"How is Hartley?" she asked abruptly.

"Blue," said Julia. "Frightfully blue."

"Oh, dear," said Claudia. She put her fork down for good and all. Everything was delicious, from the succulent trout to the hothouse strawberries, but she couldn't push another morsel past the lump of panic that blocked her throat.

Julia, who had scarcely more than nibbled at her food, looked relieved. She lifted the peak of her sleeve and glanced at the tiny wrist-watch which encased her wrist. "I don't want to shoo

you away, darling, but I've a committee meeting at three-thirty."

"I was just going," said Claudia, feeling gauche. She hardly ever escaped a session with Julia without feeling at least a little gauche.

"By the way," Julia mentioned, looking very competent, "I'm addressing the Women's League of Civil Relations next Monday night, in case you and David care to come."

"Oh, wonderful," said Claudia, knowing that wild horses couldn't drag them there.

"And I almost forgot to tell you that if you need any sports clothes, Lucy Van Ryder has opened a shop on Park Avenue and Fifty-Second Street. Ted lost millions in this last slump, and she's trying to help him get back. I might go in with her later on."

"Wouldn't Hartley mind?" asked Claudia, thinking of her conversation with David the night before.

"Mind? Why should he?" Julia shrugged. "Oh, I don't suppose he'd be overjoyed about it, but that would be entirely his own limitation."

It was a neat way of putting it, and Claudia thought about it as she emerged to the street a short while later.

Certainly it was an age when women functioned and didn't stick to the fireside, running their households. She felt a tremendous dissatisfaction with herself. She had an hour to kill before meeting David, and actually she didn't know what to do with it. "It proves the impoverished state of my capacities," she told herself glumly.

She walked down Madison Avenue to a drug store and called Helen, who was living alone at the moment in a two-room apartment with a huge terrace. Claudia hadn't seen it yet and now was as good a time as any to drop in on her.

A coloured maid answered the telephone. No, Miss Drew wasn't home. "Miss Drew done go to Washington for a few days."

Claudia hung up the receiver with a deepening sense of inadequacy. "Done go to Washington for a few days." There was something so busy and important about the way that sounded. Everybody in the whole town was busy and important. Doing things, always doing things, and going places. "I'm a total loss," thought Claudia.

The Museum of Art was but a few short blocks away. She debated whether or not to pay it a visit. "As an architect's wife I ought to be thoroughly acquainted with the museum from top to bottom." Only she didn't have that kind of a mind, and after

half an hour of wandering about she couldn't tell the difference between one statue and the next. There were a great many people who simply thrived on culture, and she wished with all her heart that she was one of them. But she wasn't, and that was that.

"What, in heaven's name, kind of person are you, anyway?" she asked herself point-blank. "What can you do to earn your salt in these hard times?"

She knew the answer. It was trembling on the tip of her tongue, it was lurking around the back of her thoughts, it was hiding down in her sub-conscious. *I can act.* Suppose she had followed up Furbish's interest last summer? Suppose she were playing a part on Broadway this minute? Suppose she were to drop into Furbish's office now—this afternoon?

"Do I remember you, young 'lady? If you were my own mother I couldn't remember you better! You're going to save my life. Here, read this part. Perfect! Just the type. A hundred a week——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Furbish, I couldn't do it for less than two hundred."

"Young woman, you're mad! All right, I wouldn't argue. Two hundred——"

"Can't you look where you're going?"

Claudia quickly side-stepped. "Oh, I *am* so sorry."

The lady on whose bunion she had tramped wore the most stylish hat that Claudia had ever seen. The lady said, "The idea!" and her chin shook with pain and indignation.

"I'm sorry," repeated Claudia abjectly.

She found herself at the crossing, with the early evening traffic beginning to crowd the avenue. "Hi, lady, watch your step!" A taxicab, veering around the corner, barely managed to escape her. She jumped back to the kerb. Her daydream had been so real that she started to turn into the drug store again to look up Furbish's number. Then she thought, without knowing where the thought came from, "It wouldn't be fair to David." Some strange inner wisdom suddenly gave her the vision to know that a man—a real man, as David was a real man—deserved the dignity of fighting his battle alone, and in his own way. It might be the age for women to function, but it was also the age for men to function, and it would be presumptuous of her to put her shoulder to the wheel, while David had a perfectly good shoulder of his own. Limitation? Perhaps. It was a nice sounding word. She tried it: "David, if you don't let me get a job and help pay my way, it's your limitation."

"I wonder," the thought occurred to her, "if part of the limitation wouldn't be mine."

He was sitting at his desk in the office when she called for him, and Roger Killian was there, too, lying back in the leather chair, sipping a glass of milk. Usually he was very conversational, but now he only said, "Hello, Lady Claudia," and went into his own office, which was simply stunning with a big divan and soft old rugs and paintings.

"Why don't you beat it home, Roger?" David called after him.

"Oh, I'll hang around a bit."

David muttered, "He'll probably sleep down here, poor devil. His wife's in Spain, nursing the Spaniards."

"No wonder he looks lost."

"He's lost and scared and worried. The doctor told him this morning he had a stomach ulcer."

"Oh," cried Claudia, with a clutch of apprehension. (That would mean double responsibility for David.) "Everybody's getting things," she said aloud, and in her soul she implored him—"Don't you, David. Please, don't you——"

"Sure," David agreed a little bitterly, "the doctors and undertakers are doing a hell of a swell business these days. Look here," he suddenly switched, "how'd you like to stay in town for a bite of supper and a show?"

"David, really?" Her first impulse was to add, "But we can't afford to." Then she decided to say nothing of the sort. "I don't really have to go," she said instead, "but I'd love to. And we're only having stew home."

"Good," said David. "Do I need a shave?"

"No, you look lovely. How do I look?"

"Handsome. You have a big spot on your waist."

"Oh, dear, it's Mamma's tomatoes and I thought they weren't going to show. I'll sit with my hand over it. Look. How's that?"

"Indecent," David said.

They began to laugh, just as if there weren't a depression, and it did wonders for David's face, which had looked tired and strained.

"If people could laugh," said Claudia passionately, "it would do a lot more for them than running around wringing their hands."

"It's not always so easy," said David. "Do you think you could laugh if I couldn't get work and we had half a dozen mouths to feed?"

"I could make a try at it. That is, if I had you to laugh along with me. Wouldn't we look silly, laughing like hyenas while we starved?"

"Fairly silly. But it's a good thing to know we could, in case we had to."

"Maybe if we can, we won't have to," Claudia said.

David looked at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know. But whatever I mean, it's awfully profound," she assured him modestly.

"You're much too dumb to know just how profound it is," he told her. "What play would you like to see?"

"Nothing historical," she firmly stipulated, "and no Shakespeare."

They tiptoed into Roger's office on the way out. He was lying down with a soft woollen cover drawn over him.

"We're going to the theatre if we can get tickets, won't you come with us?" Claudia heard herself ask.

Roger was overwhelmingly grateful, but he said he was feeling much too wretched. "You must see 'Hamlet'," he advised.

Outside the door, David said, "It was nice of you to ask him along. How'd you like to call your mother and ask her to go with us?"

Claudia thought of the dry, lonely chop sitting in the ice-box. "Oh, David, that would be wonderful. But she might come—" she warned him hesitantly.

"Go on back in the office and phone her."

Mrs. Brown was surprised to hear Claudia's voice. "I thought you'd be half-way to the country by this time," she said.

"We almost were. But we're having a party. We're celebrating".

"Celebrating what?"

"I don't know. Just celebrating. David wants you to join us."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Brown, but pleasure deepened her voice, nevertheless.

"She wouldn't come," Claudia reported to David. "But our asking her made her awfully happy and she told me all about the flowers someone had sent her. She said she'd had a beautiful day."

As they stepped into the elevator, David said, "She ought to come out to the country and live with us."

Claudia closed her eyes and said "Ooooh—" as the elevator, which was an express from the twenty-eighth floor, plunged on its downward course. "Who—" she asked feebly.

"Ooooh or Whooo?"

"Both."

"Your mother, of course."

She panted after him through the door that swung into the street. "Do you really mean that?"

"Why not? We've got the extra room and there's no need for her to pay rent when her income's pretty near cut in half. Besides, it'd make you feel a lot easier about her, wouldn't it?"

Claudia swallowed with difficulty. She nodded. "Sometimes," she said haltingly, "I wake up in the middle of the night and think if anything happened to her—living all alone like that——"

"Those are foolish thoughts."

"I know. But I have them. anyway. I don't think she'd do it, but she'd love our wanting her. She believes a young married couple ought to live alone."

"Did it ever strike you we're not a young married couple any longer? In fact, we're not even married, we're just having one long affair together." He unlocked the car, which he had left parked farther down the block and nudged her significantly. "Hey, how about a date tonight?"

"Why not? She stepped into the car with a broad wiggle of her rear. David sat down beside her. He kissed her before he put the lights on. She gasped. She said, "I'd adore to be a bad woman if that's the way they do it."

"You are," said David. "You're a bad woman, a good woman, a silly woman, and a wise woman. Only you're not a woman," he corrected himself. "You're just a crazy nut."

It was a perfect evening. In the first place, they discovered a small out-of-the-way French restaurant, which turned out to be surprisingly excellent; and in the second place, they found that they could get balcony seats for an opening night. Claudia didn't know what the play was about, but she pulled at David's coat and whispered frantically. "Whatever it is, grab it, it's an opening!"

She loved the excitement of a first night. She kept pinching David's arm every minute. "Look quick, that's Anthony Rivers, the critic——"

"Wouldn't he be in the orchestra?" David suggested blandly.

"Well, anyway, look at the woman's hair with him. I think I'll do mine that way."

"I'll divorce you."

"Oh, my Lord. Look at those d'iamonds, I want some too. Oh, David, quick, the girl in blue. Is she funny or is she funny?"

"She's funny," said David. "Shh, the curtain's going up."

It was just the kind of a play that Claudia liked—a good sound drama about recognisable people. At the end of the last act the

audience clapped and stamped, and a young unknown actress, who played a big part, had to take curtain call after curtain call.

"It's a hit," thought Claudia, with a thick pain, like hunger, gnawing within her, "and Nina Carey, whoever she is, has suddenly arrived."

They didn't talk about the play on the way home. David drove in silence, making a consistent seventy on the broad, empty expanse of the new boulevard. There were signs, all along the way, flashing out a speed limit of forty-five, but Claudia didn't say anything. She glanced at his face and saw that, for some reason, he needed to drive at seventy. ("Whatever you do, God, don't let a policeman come popping out.")

"Sleepy?"

She yawned elaborately. "Dead. If we had a blow-out would we go skidding on the road at this clip?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we wouldn't."

"Oh," she said meekly. "That's good. I was just wondering."

"Don't you ever go this fast," he cautioned her.

"I don't think I've ever made over ninety."

His anger flared. "If ever I catch you! I warn you, Claudia, if you ever drive over forty miles an hour——"

"I won't," she promised hastily. ("He's as edgy as a pregnant woman," she thought.) Sadness fell upon her like a cloak. The happy spell of the evening was over. David was facing reality again—the pressure of responsibility and obligations. She said, out of her great desire to be one with him, "You're a wonderful driver. David. I'm not a bit nervous when you drive so fast. And the way you park. It's the ambition of my life to back into a space the way you do. I wonder if I'll ever be able to."

"I doubt it."

He slowed down for a traffic light and cursed softly, tapping his foot in impatience because the car in front of him didn't start off quickly enough.

Claudia sighed. A worried man wasn't easy to live with. She was glad when, a little later, they drove into their own garage. The house was dark, except for lights in the kitchen.

"Smell how sweet," she said, gazing up at the moon. She stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn't reached out to yank her arm. "Look where you're going, can't you?" he adjured her harshly.

Her blood boiled, suddenly and irrepressibly. "Oh, dear God, I'm sorry, but worried or not, I'd like to kick him."

Bertha and Fritz were still up. Bertha was ironing and Fritz was waxing the pantry floor. "At this hour!" Claudia cried, enraged. "Go to bed at once!"

"We go soon," said Bertha comfortably. "Bobby behaved himself fine all day," she anticipated the eternal question.

"Everything's fine in the barn, too," said Fritz to David. He withdrew something from his pocket. "Not two yolks but three, I bet you," he said proudly.

Claudia gasped. She'd never seen such a mammoth egg in all her life. "Did one of *our* chickens do that?" she asked.

"The rooster," said David. "Wasn't it, Fritz?"

"Aber sure," said Fritz, grinning.

Claudia maintained a haughty silence. If she had been sure enough of her ground, she'd have given them a very good answer.

David didn't talk again until he was washing his teeth. "That girl in the play reminded me a little of you," he said through his toothbrush.

Claudia started. She'd been thinking of the girl, too. She'd thought of her on and off all the way home—her dressing-room flooded with people and everybody kissing everybody else, and the producer and author and all the actors rushing out for the morning reviews. She wondered just what success would mean to Nina Carey. Would it mean a sudden, blessed cessation of all worry—helping someone she loved? Or would it mean just fame and glamour? Carefully, timidly, Claudia worded the question that clamoured in her heart for utterance. "Do you think," she asked, a little too nonchalantly, "that I could ever do a part like that?"

David put the cap back on his toothpaste. "No; no, don't!" Claudia hastily interceded; "I'm going to use it."

But David kept screwing it on. He was built that way, he always put the tops back on things. "Sure you could," he said.

"Could what?"

"Do that part. A lot better than she did it. She was all right, she was good, but nothing extraordinary."

Claudia warmed. "I didn't want to be sour grapes, but I didn't think she was so wonderful, either. I didn't like her scene with the father at all. Too stilted. She gave you the answer to it straight off, so there was no climax, no subtle nuance of surprise at the end——"

"That's it. That's what the scene missed."

"But the audience seemed to like her, anyway. They certainly were keen about her." Claudia could have kicked herself for

letting something creep into her tone that had no business being there.

David caught it immediately. He said in a quick, short voice, "Have you ever wished you'd followed up with Furbish after the try-out last summer?"

She glanced at him swiftly, but she couldn't see his face, for he had bent to untie his shoelace. She fenced for time, "You mean go back on the stage, David?"

"You might have been in her place tonight. You realise that, don't you?" He sounded almost angry, as if he were saying, "We let an opportunity slip, we could both be sitting on easy street——"

She couldn't glimpse what was working in him, what he was driving at. She took a chance. "It would be nice, if I'd happened to go into a play that had a long run, wouldn't it? Especially now?"

"Why especially now?"

"Just imagine—hundreds of dollars a week, a new part for next season, perhaps—maybe a star later on——"

He came to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Would that mean a lot to you?"

"Wouldn't it to you, David? I mean, wouldn't it help some?"

He shook his head. "No, Claudia, it wouldn't. I don't suppose you can understand it, but it would make things just a little harder. If it gave you happiness, though, it would be different. I'd call myself a pompous jackass and let it go at that."

Her eyes filled with tears. He was so honest, so real. Yes, he understood. He needed her at this time to be exactly the way she was—not smart, or capable, but trusting and dependent. And in some strange way, her dependence would build him up, instead of pulling him down, and her trust would make him strong. She wound her arms around him. She wanted to tell him that success and money wouldn't make her happy, that she wasn't important in this crisis of their lives. It was he who was important! It was he who must lift himself above the worry in the world—lift himself above it and not grow sick and bitter with it. "Don't you see," she wanted to cry out, "whatever happens to us doesn't really matter, the only thing that matters is the way we take it." But the words froze on her lips. She stared past his shoulder in horror. Shakespeare had suddenly materialised out of thin air, tail aloft and insides purring. Before she could stop him, he began a slow, measured promenade against the ottoman, against David's blue trousers that lay across the ottoman.

David turned and followed her stricken gaze. Without a word,

he switched off the lamp and Shakespeare's eyes became suddenly two amber lights piercing through the darkness. "Hush," said David, "let the poor thing alone, it's the only pleasure she has left in life."

A great peace came upon her. "He" she murmured.

"He. You didn't answer my question."

"Which question?"

"The stage. Whether you've ever regretted—whether you'd want to have been in that girl's shoes this evening——"

She yawned tremendously. "I certainly would not," she said. "Really, if I had to stay up until midnight every night I'd simply die——"

David laughed out suddenly and there was a note of jubilation in his laughter. He pulled her to him, with his lips on hers.

She sighed contentedly. "He still thinks I'm a crazy nut," she thought.

CHAPTER NINE

BEYOND THE FARTHEST STAR

CLAUDIA was ashamed to show her face inside the doctor's office. Except that this time she was sure it wasn't a false alarm. "If it is, then something's wrong with me and I ought to see a doctor, anyway," she decided, and gave the doorman a sunny smile of recognition.

Doctor Rowland was the last doctor she would have selected of her own accord. What with the depression she'd have picked out someone with a great deal less overhead than a duplex on Park Avenue and a carnation in his button-hole. But she had gone to him originally as a poor relation of Julia's, and he'd been awfully decent and hadn't charged a cent extra when she'd almost died of having Bobby. He'd probably added quite a lot to poor Julia's bill, though, to make up for it. But Julia didn't seem to notice. She swore by Dr. Rowland. He'd been trying for a number of years to find out why she couldn't have any children and then he'd concluded that she'd be better off not being bothered with wanting to have them, so he'd operated on her and now she never had to worry about anything—except her health.

Claudia felt extremely grateful as she took her place in the waiting room. Doctor Rowland had the smartest clientele in the city, but you couldn't have told it by the women sitting there, for a mink coat over a bump looked just as bad if not worse than a cloth coat over a bump.

"I hope," thought Claudia complacently, "that I'll look just as marvellous as I did with Bobby." and, for the hundredth time, she built up plans not to tell David or her mother until the baby was practically ready to appear.

Not that it would be easy to put anything over on them, because they were certainly a family without any privacy or reserve. When her mother had first come to live with them she'd found it a little difficult to get used to so much informality, but now she felt completely at home and hardly batted an eyelash when David

would march into her room with a button to sew on, and scarcely a stitch on him. Or when he'd use language that had once caused her to blush with shame for him. Indeed, Claudia had been amazed one day to hear her mother mumble something that sounded suspiciously like one of his special four-letter words—a word that made hell or damn seem like mere child's play in comparison. "Why, Mrs. Brown, you're magnificent!" she'd exclaimed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mrs. Brown had returned coldly. But she'd looked a little guilty, anyway, and just a trifle pleased with herself.

"Mother's improved a lot," David had conceded, when Claudia told him about it, and Claudia said, "Yes, she was a different woman." For one thing, Mrs. Brown had gradually stopped fussing and worrying. There'd been a time, not long ago, when she'd check up on every sneeze. "Claudia, put a sweater on!" "Claudia, change those wet shoes this very instant!" Or be hanging out of the window if Claudia was ten minutes late. Now she'd say, with a curiously peaceful look in her eyes, "You've got a husband to take care of you, I wash my hands of you."

Claudia wondered if her mother would have a relapse to her old habits when she heard about the baby. She probably would—she'd be as bad as ever, and watch Claudia like a policeman. Claudia musn't eat nuts, which she adored. Claudia musn't climb on ladders. Claudia musn't drive the car. "I won't tell her," Claudia made up her mind. "I won't tell anybody even if I have to walk backwards for six months." Which, of course, when she stopped to analyse it, would only have made matters worse; but somewhere in the idea, there was undoubtedly a theory.

While she was trying to figure it out, the nurse admitted a newcomer and everybody sized her up out of the corner of their eyes. She was stunning, in a short fur coat and a smart skimpy dress, and thin as a rail. When she turned around, Claudia said, "Oh!"—because of all people, who should it be but Victoria Manners.

Claudia was pleased as could be. She hadn't seen or heard from Victoria since the try-out. "Hello!" she cried enthusiastically.

"Why, hello——" said Victoria, slowly, and much less enthusiastically.

"I wonder," it occurred to Claudia in a flash, "if she's still in love with David." Then, as if in answer to her thought, Victoria drawled, "How is that nice husband of yours?"

"Fine," said Claudia, and then she added in a low burst of confidence, "he's going to have another baby——"

"Really," said Victoria, but she looked as bored as anything. Her eyes swept Claudia's slim figure. "You don't show it," she remarked.

"Neither do you," said Claudia generously.

A dullish red flush crept up under Victoria's porcelain skin. "I'm not," she said shortly. "Don't be ridiculous."

It wasn't until afterwards that Claudia remembered that Victoria wasn't married. Or was she? At any rate, babies had no place in the life of Broadway's most popular actress. "I'm so glad," thought Claudia, "that I haven't got all messed up in a carcer." The summer theatre was going to open its second season at Redbury in June and she had been wondering whether or not her success last year would give her some entrée to the company this year. "They'd be fools if they didn't come after you," David kept assuring her loyally.

Now she didn't have to worry whether they came after her or not. She counted on her fingers. By June she'd have a lot more important things to occupy her than summer theatres. It was wonderful to think that actually she wasn't impelled to do anything but spend the next months of her existence having a baby. Ambition died within her. It was regrettable, but that was evidently the sort of vegetable she was.

She glanced at Victoria. Victoria was no vegetable—Victoria was chock full of ambition. It stuck out all over her. She sat powdering her nose in the mirror of her compact and nervously tapping her high-heeled slipper which let her big toe out. Claudia reflected with satisfaction that David couldn't abide that type of footgear. It was enough to prejudice him for ever. He was funny that way. He'd pass some gorgeous old war horse on the street and think she was wonderful, but a perfectly nice woman with lipstick on her teeth, or a silly 'kerchief tied over her head like a make-believe peasant, filled him with a disgusted intolerance. "If I were married to that," he'd say, "I'd wring her neck."

The nurse rustled in. "Doctor will see you," she murmured in Victoria's ear.

Victoria snapped her compact to and rose. She nodded to Claudia and followed the nurse down the hall toward Doctor Rowland's office.

There were several patients ahead of her and every one of them looked daggers. "Actresses get all the breaks," said the woman next to Claudia a little bitterly.

"Not *all* the breaks," said Claudia, thinking of David.

She pushed back her sleeve. Eleven-forty something—almost quarter to twelve to be precise—and she was due to meet him for lunch at one. Her news would cheer him up—that is, unless she didn't tell him. Although finances seemed to be picking up a little, he'd been looking strangely preoccupied of late, as if the world going crazy was preying on his mind. Personally, Claudia couldn't keep track of all the upset and felt that it was fortunate that David knew enough for both of them. She often thought how dreadful it was to be so pleased with life when there was war and persecution and unemployment going on in the universe, but now that she was pregnant, she felt justified in enjoying each day to the fullest. After all, it wouldn't help matters to go around with a long face. Her eyes travelled about the room. Five women and not one of them seemed really happy. "I couldn't look unhappy if I tried," thought Claudia.

The nurse nodded to her and led her to a small ante-office. "Doctor will see you between patients," she said.

What she implied was, "You're just jumping at conclusions again and it won't take Doctor Rowland but a minute to tell you so."

But Doctor Rowland had the surprise of his life. "Well, well, well," he said, after he'd examined her. Then he settled down to business and took her blood pressure and all the rest of the things that went with having a baby.

"Am I good?" asked Claudia inquisitively.

"I wish all my patients were as good," said Doctor Rowland, forgetting his expensive manner for once. He pulled out her old history card from the file. "Let me see, you're twenty-two——"

"Almost twenty-three, I'm a lot behind."

"A lot behind?" he echoed, mystified.

"My schedule," Claudia explained. "I didn't want more than two years between babies."

"I think you're doing very well," said Doctor Rowland mildly. "After all, the first one's only three."

"Of course, it would even things up if this one's twins," she wheedled. "Could you tell yet if it is?"

"Do twins run in your family?"

She had to admit that they did not, but at the same time, David was pretty wonderful——

He might have been wonderful in some things, but he was certainly in a vile temper by the time she reached the restaurant.

"Where in hell have you been?" he greeted her. "I've been waiting for three-quarters of an hour."

She felt exactly as if she was walking on air, so of course, nothing that he said really touched her. She listened in silence while he held forth on the fact that women were congenitally unable to keep an appointment on time and that she, in particular, was as irresponsible as a flea. She knew perfectly well that he'd been worried about her, but he wouldn't have admitted it for the world. So he kept getting nastier and nastier and she just sat opposite him and smiled, feeling like Mona Lisa, and thinking what a child he was, in spite of being six feet tall. He'd feel very silly and contrite when he found out where she'd been, but in the meantime it was fun just to let him rave on, and accept his abuse with that mysterious remoteness and detachment. "I'm sorry," she murmured meekly.

"Sorry!"

"Shh—" She picked up the menu. "Can't we order?"

The waiter was at their side in an instant. Claudia wished he'd go away. She liked to be alone with a bill of fare; she didn't like to be hurried. She wished that just once she could take as long as she pleased to decide what she wanted and that, once she got it, she wouldn't feel as if she should have ordered what the people at the next table were eating.

"What are you taking?" she asked David companionably.

"Never mind what I'm taking; you order what you want," he returned crisply.

His attitude crippled her. She thought, resentfully, "When two people are ordering in a restaurant there ought at least to be a certain amount of co-operation." She'd have liked him for example, to fall in with all sorts of little schemes. But he never would. If she said, "Let's have one order of lobster and one order of ravioli, and divide," he'd look obdurate and ill at ease. If she said, "I'll order full dinner and you can have my soup and coffee out of it," he'd have thought she was committing an unholy breach. No, he was too good for that. He'd order his own soup and coffee *à la carte*. And when he did condescend to a table d'hôte, which was rare, he wouldn't order the dessert that was coming to him. This never failed to irritate Claudia. She'd say significantly, "The cherry tart is marvellous," and kick him under the table for good measure.

"You know I don't eat desserts," he'd begin virtuously, but with another kick he'd finally catch on. "I'll have the cherry tart and madame will have the ice cream."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

Waiters as a rule were politely discreet and they hardly ever let on that they knew that both the cherry tart and the ice cream were going to be for madame.

"You're hell in a restaurant," David often commented gloomily.

"Well, I like to order things," she'd argue, "that I don't get at home. Is that a crime?"

Today she very definitely wanted to celebrate by ordering something out of the ordinary.

"I think," she said, studying the *entrées*, "that I'd like the *escargots sauté*——"

The waiter's approval of her choice was unqualified. "They are a *spécialité*, Madame, and very fine," he said in a pleased voice.

"You won't like them," David put in. "Better take roast beef."

"Don't be silly, I adore *sautéed* mushrooms."

"They're not mushrooms, they're snails," David enlightened her tersely.

Snails. The word did something to her. It made her realise that she didn't have the iron stomach she'd always prided herself on having. It made her remember that sometimes, when you were having a baby, you were apt to be a little squeamish over this or that. She winced and closed her eyes. "I don't think I want them," she said faintly.

"Take the roast beef," David repeated, his eyes rolling with patience.

She revived sufficiently to consult her menu. "Where is the roast beef?" she demanded.

"It's just plain roast beef. Order it and be done with it."

"I'd like to see it, please, if you don't mind," she told him stiffly.

"Here——" he cried, thrusting his menu at her, with his finger marking the spot.

"It is here, Madame," the waiter echoed gently, and bent over her with his own menu.

"Where? Oh, I see." Yes, there it was. PRIME RIBS OF BEEF—EXTRA CUT—\$1.00.

"What comes with it?"

"Nothing comes with it. Madame, but perhaps you'd like an order of fresh string beans or peas?"

"I'm having a mixed green salad," David informed her brusquely.

She brightened. "Oh, are you? Well, then, let's share it and I'll order a portion of fresh string beans and we'll share that, too. All right?"

David said all right, but he looked like he wanted to kill her.

The waiter vanished. Claudia said indignantly, "Roast beef should at least come with a potato; that's getting away with murder for a dollar."

"Since when are you crazy about potatoes?"

"I'm not, but it's the principle of the thing. Don't let's come here any more."

"It's the best food in town," said David. "I thought you'd like it."

"Oh, I do, darling." She was filled with remorse. Here he was, wanting to please her and she was carping over a potato. She thought joyfully, "It must be my condition." She observed him from beneath her lashes. He was still grumpy and silent—which was unusual, for it wasn't in his nature to hold a grouch more than a few minutes. Perhaps she ought to tell him. Prospective fatherhood might do wonders for him. She waited until the waiter had placed beside them twin platters of beef, swimming in thin red gravy and garnished frugally with watercress.

"Oh, it looks lovely," she exclaimed affably. "Guess who I met today?"

"Who?" said David, without interest.

"I said guess. A friend of yours. Female. Was in love with you and still is, I bet. Guess."

"Couldn't," said David, sprinkling Worcestershire sauce.

"Sprinkle some on mine. I always pour too much. Victoria Manners."

David's expression did not change, but Claudia noticed that he wasn't eating.

"Guess where I met her?" she pursued. (There was a dramatic technique in springing this piece of news.)

"Look, darling," said David, "never mind Victoria Manners; I have something to tell you."

"*He* has something to tell *me*," smiled Claudia inwardly. Aloud she said with a kind of secret triumph, "Aren't you even interested in her?"

"No," said David, "I'm not." He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "Be quiet a minute and listen to me."

"You look so serious all at once."

He kept his hand on hers, and she felt the warm pressure of his fingers deepen and enfold. David's hands were like that—they could always tell her things without words. "I love you," they would say, or again, "You devil," meaning also that he loved her. Now they said, "I love you, but I'm going to hurt you."

"David, what is it?"

"Shall I let you have it straight or shall I beat around the bush? "

"Straight, of course." She laughed shakily. "We've landed in the poorhouse after all, and supposing." (But with a baby coming——)

"No," he said. "We've not landed in the poorhouse. It's Mother."

"Mamma?" She half rose from the table. "She was all right when I left this morning. Did Bertha phone that anything was the matter? "

"Nobody phoned. Sit down."

"David, you're not sorry she's living with us? "

"Don't be silly, of course not. Look, darling, you remember when she went into town last month for a few days? "

"You mean on account of her teeth? "

"Yes. Only it wasn't her teeth. She went to the doctor. She had some X-ray pictures taken. Then I went with her to another doctor——"

"But why? Neither of you ever mentioned it. What did the doctors say? Is there anything wrong? "

"Yes, dear."

Her heart beat like something alive and unruly in her breast. She could only think of Julia—those hours of anxious waiting, and Hartley's face, fear-ridden. "Oh, David, will she have to have an operation? "

"I wish to God she did, Claudia. But an operation won't help. It's hopeless."

Then and then only did he withdraw his hand. As if to allow her to be alone, as if to say, "You can take this all by yourself. I trust you to take it."

She felt his trust. She felt the quiet, forceful challenge of his eyes across the table. His eyes kept her from screaming out, "I can't stand it, I won't stand it," and because his hand was not holding her she sat very still in her chair, not moving except to reach for the salt cellar and carefully season the slice of meat that lay before her.

"David——"

"Yes, dear."

"Why didn't you tell me this before? "

"She didn't want you to know. She doesn't know now that I've told you. Her single thought is how to keep it from you. Not to let you know until—well, until there's no keeping it any longer. But I don't think it's fair to you, dear. You're not a child."

No. She wasn't a child. But she felt like a child—lost and desperate with the agony that filled her. "David, is it right for me to feel like this?"

"I don't know, dear. Sometimes when I've looked at you two together I've told myself, 'It isn't normal for mother and daughter to be so close——' Other times I've felt sorry for all I've missed."

"But you pay so much when you love like this," Claudia whispered.

"Then pay, darling. Don't be niggardly with life. Open your arms to it. Be friends with happiness and be friends with pain."

She was silent. She heard what he said, but she could not quite understand it. Be friends with pain. Pain was tearing her apart, yet he would have her be friends with it.

"David, how long?"

"Months, perhaps."

Courage deserted her. "I can't face it." She did not voice the words, but David answered them.

"You can," he said. "You thought you couldn't face my death, either, and you did."

"If I face this, will God let me off from going through with it?" she asked him tremulously.

He smiled in pity. "No, darling. It doesn't always work that way."

"I suppose not. Months . . . At first it seemed so long. Now it seems such a little time that's left to be with her."

"I know. That's why I wanted to tell you."

"I'd never have forgiven you if you hadn't."

"I was sure of that. I was glad when you said you were coming in town today, so that we could be alone for a little."

She remembered suddenly the reason for her trip to New York. There was no joy now in telling him; nor was there joy in not telling him. It was simply something that needed to be said. "David, I went to the doctor, too, today. I'm going to have another baby."

"Oh, my darling."

"David——"

"Yes, dear?"

"In a way it's hard, having the baby now, but in another way it's wonderful. I mean, that she can know about it."

"That's true."

"But when we go home don't let's say anything about—anything else. Just the baby."

He cleared his throat. "You mean you don't want her to know that I've told you."

She nodded.

"It won't be easy, darling."

"Lots of things aren't easy, but you can do them if you have to. I have to do this for her, David; I must. She's always wanted to protect me from everything." Tears blinded her. She couldn't go on.

David's hands reached out, and it was as if he put his arms around her. "Just a couple of swell dames," he said huskily.

He cleared his throat again and motioned to the waiter. "Check, please."

The waiter sprang forward with tragic shoulders. "But you haven't touched your plates!" he cried.

"We weren't very hungry," David explained.

Claudia felt sorry for the waiter. "It looked delicious," she added unsteadily. "It really did."

"Come back to the office with me," David suggested as they stepped into the street. "I'll clear up my desk and drive home with you. That is unless you'd rather go alone."

"I'd rather go alone if it were anyone else in the world but you," said Claudia. "But when you're with me I can be more alone than if I was by myself."

"Thanks," said David, grinning. "That makes me—what?" but he knew what she meant, anyway, and he said that it was a great compliment and he could return it a hundred per cent.

"Not honestly you couldn't. I gabble."

"But it's just the same as saying nothing."

"Thanks," she said, and then they both grinned, and two tears ran down her cheeks, and she dabbed angrily at them and blew her nose.

"As soon as we get on our way," David said, "you just go ahead and bawl."

"And have you call me a sissy?"

"I won't call you a sissy. I bawled myself."

"David. Did you?"

He nodded.

She felt as if they had never been so close as at this moment.

They met Roger returning from his daily luncheon of milk and crackers. He looked much better than he had been looking and Claudia told him so. But he didn't seem to like hearing it. "I've been feeling wretched," he insisted.

"I'm knocking off for this afternoon," David said, changing the subject.

Roger perked up a little. "What's wrong? Headache? Cold?"

He didn't want David to be ill, of course, but having a stomach ulcer of his own seemed to make him interested in other people's ailments.

Claudia glanced at David. She hoped he wasn't going to say why he was knocking off. She couldn't bear talking about it to an outsider.

David said, "We're celebrating."

"What now?"

"Another baby."

"Another baby!" Roger's voice climbed upward. "How marvellous! Congratulations, my dear! Congratulations!"

He gave Claudia a fatherly kiss. He said, "You're the happiest couple I know, never a cloud, never a falling out."

"Oh, we have our ups and downs," said David casually.

"And we fight like cats and dogs," said Claudia. "In private."

Roger solemnly shook his head. "You can't make me believe that. I don't believe you know the meaning of the word unhappiness."

"We don't" said Claudia, and her heart felt like it was going to burst in two.

"How old is Roger?" she asked as they drove out beyond the city limits.

"Well over fifty, I should say."

"Oh, what's it all about?" She didn't go on. She wanted to cry rebelliously, "His wife doesn't love him and his children don't respect him——"

"Roger's not ready to go," said David, knowing what was in her mind. "Not by a long shot."

"Is Mamma?"

"I think so."

"But I'm not ready!" Claudia cried. "I can't give her up, I can't, David. Oh. I can't!"

He drew the car to a stop. Pain had its way with her at last. It washed through her in great waves, merging her into the pain that filled the universe, so that she was all pain, and life was all pain, and she became lost and one with pain. Then suddenly there was no feeling left in her, as if she had reached the limit of pain, as if fire had burned her to dry ashes. She said, "Are my eyes very red?"

"They'll be all right," said David, "by the time we get home. He started up the car. They didn't talk again until the little salt-box house greeted them at the bend of the road. It looked just as usual—lights in the living-room and lights in the nursery. The dogs barked their welcome and a small dark form scurried into

the shrubbery. The cat was always there, waiting for them, but somehow ashamed—if a cat can be ashamed—to show that he was waiting.

"Nothing changed," said Claudia. "Yet everything's changed. Just in a few short hours."

"Everything's always changing," said David. "From minute to minute."

"Then there isn't anything you can be certain of in life?"

"Except uncertainty."

She winced from the thought. "That's so dreadful."

David shook his head. "It's so healing," he amended gently.

He turned into the living-room and let her go upstairs alone. She was grateful. She stood outside the nursery door, with her pulses pounding up into her throat and the palms of her hands moist and cold. "I m'ghn't be able to carry it off," she thought in panic. Then she said to herself, "A fine actress you turned out to be." It was easier once you thought of it that way. You could split yourself into two people and one of you could go on acting no matter how the other felt.

She pushed open the door and walked in. The room was empty, but Bobby's clothes lay across a chair, and from the bathroom came the gush of running water.

Bobby was already in the tub, holding both hands beneath the faucet and cupping the flow with yelps of glee. Mrs. Brown was sitting next to him on a low stool. She wore, judiciously, a rubber apron over her dark cloth dress. She always looked ready to go out for a walk, with her hair just so and the soft curves of advancing years securely girdled.

Claudia stood for an instant watching her, her eyes alert, yet fearful to detect some mark of illness that might hitherto have escaped her. But no, Mrs. Brown seemed just as usual, except that some strange quality of quietude made Claudia feel that her mother was not really there at all but had already taken leave of earthly ties. "I musn't hold her," it came to her realisation. David's right. She's ready to go. She's been ready for quite a long time."

Bobby caught sight of her. He screamed his delight and, in his great desire to express his joy, he threw some water on her. "You good-for-nothing!" Claudia cried. "Stop it! Stop it!" She blessed him for this moment of rowdy normality.

Mrs. Brown turned. "Hello," she said. "Back?"

"What makes you think so?" Claudia retorted a little too foolishly. "I'm still in New York, Mamma, just look at the pot-belly on that child! Is it natural or what?"

"It's natural," said Mrs. Brown, and added with pride, "You looked just like that until you were almost five."

"She's going to look like that again," said David on the threshold, winking broadly.

Mrs. Brown said to Bobby, "Come on now, show Mamma and Daddy how you can wash yourself."

Claudia sighed. "The woman's dull, David. She doesn't catch on."

Bobby sloshed the washrag over his chest and smiled self-consciously. "Very brilliant," Claudia dryly commented.

Mrs. Brown was indignant. "He's only three! What do you expect of the child?"

"You spoil him terribly," said Claudia. She shrugged. "Well, I don't care, we're going to get a new one, anyway."

Mrs. Brown rescued the soap-dish. "Ah, ah," she adjured her grandson, "musn't throw it."

"Why?" asked Bobby, tight-lipped.

"Because it's for the nice soap," Mrs. Brown explained.

"Soapie," David corrected. "Claudia, the woman isn't very bright, that's the long and short of it."

"Maybe she's deaf," said Claudia hopefully. "Maybe she didn't hear what we said."

"I heard what you said," Mrs. Brown pleasantly assured them. "But I didn't think it was so screamingly funny."

"What did we say?" they asked in a breath.

"Soapie," she replied.

They hooted. "Listen, Mrs. Brown," Claudia announced in tones of one syllable, "we're trying to tell you that we're going to have another baby!"

Mrs. Brown's hands dropped in her lap. "That's wonderful," she said softly.

She didn't ask how they knew it, or suggest that it might be another of Claudia's wild conclusions. She seemed to know that it was true. "I was hoping it would happen soon," she said, more to herself than to them. "Bobby's just at the right age," she went on quickly. "Let's see, that makes it about September, doesn't it?"

It was hard for Claudia to swallow the lump in her throat. She couldn't speak. David suddenly swooped Bobby from the tub and wrapped him in a towel. "Too hot in here," he said quickly.

"But he's not ready yet; I haven't done his ears," Mrs. Brown protested.

"His ears are fine." He threw Bobby into his crib and rolled

him around, and Bobby tried to stand on his head, showing off. "Give me his pyjamas," David ordered, very competent.

Claudia tossed him the flannel sleeping garment. David got mixed up and thrust Bobby's arms into the legs.

Mrs. Brown took matters into her own hands. "Here, give me that," she said peremptorily. She gave David a push. He pretended to lose his balance. Mrs. Brown looked startled and then laughed. "Roughneck," he accused her grievously.

The days passed, one after another. Spring broke through the winter-frozen ground and Claudia found a yellow crocus, and brought it to her mother.

"The first one," cried Mrs. Brown. She laid aside her sewing and lifted the flower to her nose.

"Crocuses don't smell," said Claudia sternly.

"They do. They smell damp and that's a lovely smell."

"Let's see." Claudia sniffed. She looked firm and disapproving. "Nonsense. Pure imagination. Bertha needs sugar. Do you want to take a little drive with me to the village?"

"I'd enjoy it," said Mrs. Brown. She rose with alacrity and walked to the mirror, pulling down her waist. Claudia followed her with her eyes. Bertha didn't need sugar—Bertha was the sort of cook who never ran out of things—but Claudia made up excuses, whenever she could, to substitute a ride for the usual afternoon walk.

For some time those walks had been growing slower and shorter. Claudia always took the blame on herself. "My legs are tired, let's turn back," or "I'm cold, aren't you?" Often she could see relief come into her mother's face.

None of the tradespeople noticed that Mrs. Brown was ill. Except that a few days ago a friendly neighbour had asked in passing conversation, "Aren't you losing a little weight, Mrs. Brown? You seem thinner."

Claudia's heart had stopped. She'd been careful not to look at her mother. But Mrs. Brown had answered casually, "I shouldn't wonder. I've been cutting down on starches."

Now, as she stood before the bureau, Claudia noticed anew that although her mother looked somehow younger and clearer—strangely like her old pictures twenty years ago—there were deeper hollows in her cheeks and her trim black skirt hung loosely. Claudia swallowed twice. Sooner or later she must acknowledge the visual fact of her mother's gradual failing. Her knuckles went white with the struggle of achieving nonchalance.

"I think you really are losing weight on that diet," she re-

marked. "It's becoming, too. Your figure's positively girlish, Mrs. Brown."

"Yes, isn't it?" Mrs. Brown agreed. "I'm quite pleased with my new shape. I think I'll let Bertha have all my old clothes for her daughter, and go on a shopping spree next autumn."

"That's a good idea," said Claudia. "It's time you treated yourself to a decent outfit."

The next day Mrs. Brown went through her closet and her bureau drawers, and Bertha—who knew—stood with her arms laden and said, "Ach, so much you give me!" Her eyes were full of tears and her sweet, stout face worked with emotion. Claudia said, "I never saw anyone like Bertha; she always boohoos when you're nice to her." She thought to herself, "There must be something wrong with me that I can laugh and talk as if I meant it." She knew why her mother was doing this—so that there should be less later for Claudia to go through, less to evoke remembering. It was as if the cheerful lived-in room were already empty—as if, once more, Mrs. Brown was merely staying with them for a fleeting visit. "Soon she'll be gone, and the new baby will be sleeping here instead." Claudia was cruel to herself, consciously cruel, deliberate—wondering why the thought did not tear her apart in anguish. "I'm cold and dead inside. I can't hurt. I can't feel any more pain. I'm glad."

David didn't know that this had happened to her. "Darling," he said humbly one evening when they were alone in their bedroom, "I don't know how you do it."

She pulled away from him, standing straight and stiff. "I'll tell you how I do it. There's nothing brave or gallant about it, the way you think. It's just that I don't care any more. I've given her up. I've given everything up. Nothing really belonged to me—not this house, not Bobby, not even you. Everything you have in life is only lent to you."

"That's a great thing to have learned, my dearest."

"Is it?" Her eyes were hard. "I don't think so. Because once you've learned it, there's no sense going on with giving your heart and soul to what you don't possess, and never can possess."

David shook his head. "You're wrong there. You've worked out half a philosophy, but not the whole of it. A loan is more precious than a gift, and brings with it a greater obligation."

"No, thank you." She gave a short, sharp laugh. "I'll lend you a new baby, but I'll take back the loan of your mother. Is that it?"

"Exactly. And why not?"

"Then I say," she retorted shrilly with a rising hysteria, "it's

very kind of You, whoever You are, but I don't care to have the new baby on those terms, I don't want the new baby on any terms! It's all blind and stupid suffering because there isn't any God at the head of things. I used to think there was, but now I know there isn't, or He couldn't let my mother die like this!"

"Hush!" said David. He moved swiftly to the door and closed it. "You don't want her to hear, do you?"

She shook her head dumbly. "Oh, David—" She went into his arms, clinging desperately to the security of his strength and wisdom. But for the first time in their marriage his love completely failed her. It was as if she stood alone—bereft and terrified.

David spoke to Doctor Rowland, and Doctor Rowland called it nerves and gave her bromides on her next visit. "Women get edgy during pregnancy," he assured her tactfully, "especially under difficult circumstances. Dissolve one of these in water after meals."

Obediently, Claudia did as she was told, and then she poured the mixture down the basin. Bromides couldn't keep her from waking up in the middle of the night, watching for a slice of light beneath her mother's door, or listening, with bated breath, for the soft pad of footsteps in the hall. It was so hard—so intolerably hard—to lie quietly and pretend to be asleep. To lie quietly and feel the baby move within her. When she was carrying Bobby, she had used to cry, with pride and triumph, "David! It's the most wonderful thing in the world!" Now she closed herself off from feeling. She was afraid to feel.

David knew when she was lying there, awake.

"Can I get you anything, dear?"

"Not a thing, dear, thanks."

She was always appreciative and touched by this unfailing awareness, but her soul could not go forth to meet him. She was chained to the life within her and the knowledge filled her with the panic of an animal—trapped. She had never known this fear before. She had never known what it meant to brace herself to meet each new dawn that streaked the sky. Confusion lay upon her like a blanket. She could neither understand nor accept the fact that birth must be, in some strange way, allied with death.

There came a morning when she rose to find her mother still in bed. She had known that some day this would have to happen. She said, above the dread that chilled her, "What's the matter, Lazybones, didn't you sleep well?"

"Not so very," Mrs. Brown admitted. "I'm just about to get up."

"Oh, no, don't. Bertha wants to thorough-clean the dining-

room and it would be easier if you'd let her bring you up a tray and then she wouldn't have to set the table."

Mrs. Brown lay back against her pillows. "If it would be easier—" she consented, trying not to look too eager.

"Much easier," repeated Claudia, firmly.

"A tray," Claudia said to Bertha in the kitchen. It was like saying, "This is the beginning of the end."

Bertha bit her lips. "It's good," she said. "It is time she is giving in a little." She sighed. "Ach, M ss Claudia, gladly I would go instead, if God would only let me."

Claudia brushed the tears from her eyes. "That's beautiful of you, Bertha, but what would Fritz do without you?"

"Yah, Fritz. I guess I have to stay. You and me, child, we have to stay."

"I don't want to stay." But Claudia didn't give shape to the thought. She was ashamed of it. She turned away from Bertha's sad clear gaze.

Fritz, who was so close to the earth, seemed alone to sense her rebellion and despair. One afternoon he called her to the barn. "A baby duckling," he said. "Take it for your mother to see." He laid the little thing in her hand.

Claudia looked at it. "Just born and hurrying so quickly toward death," she said bitterly. "It's wrong."

"It is right," Fritz told her sternly. "Because that is life." In his rough blue overalls, with his face wind-burned and streaked with honest sweat, he seemed in that moment to be like some Christ-like image of the land. "And to die," he finished, "is also to live."

"No," said Claudia tonelessly, "to die is to be dead."

She walked back to the house. A bud had opened on one of the rose bushes. She stooped to pluck it. She would say, "Which hand, Mrs. Brown?" She couldn't help smiling. It was strange how the relationship was reversed between them. She was no longer the child she was the mother.

Bertha was waiting for her at the kitchen door. "I made her lie down," she said. "Also," she added gently, "I have sent for the doctor."

Doctor Barry, who lived only a few miles away, knew about the case. "He'll make it easy for her when the time comes," David had promised Claudia.

The time had come. Now Doctor Barry's small blue roadster drew up each day in front of the salt-box house. "Doctor Barry

says I have a little trouble with my innards," Mrs. Brown apologetically explained.

"Yes, I know, he told me," Claudia replied, sitting on the edge of the bed and carefully filing her nails. "Isn't it a shame, in this lovely weather? Why don't we get a nurse for a few days, so that you can take it absolutely easy? I mean—you'd probably have a fit if I brought you your trays and Bertha's too fat to keep running up and down the stairs."

A great relief spread over Mrs. Brown's face. "That might be very sensible," she agreed.

It was as simple as that. Claudia telephoned to David and he brought the nurse out with him that evening. Her name was Miss Jellife. She was capable and efficient. She went into Mrs. Brown's room and closed the door behind her with authority. "That's that," Claudia breathed.

"That's that," said David. They both knew that it wasn't going to be very long.

The nurse came on Wednesday, and Claudia's pains began the following Sunday morning. Mrs. Brown had had a bad night and when Claudia went in to tell her good-bye, the room was darkened. Claudia was glad. Her mother must be glad, too.

"Well, Mrs. Brown," she said gaily, "I'm off! Isn't it lucky it's a Sunday and David's home to drive me into town?"

"You'd be surprised how many babies come on Sunday," Miss Jellife put in quickly. ("She's not able to talk," thought Claudia.)

"Are they very bad?" Mrs. Brown's voice came with effort.

"You mean the pains? Poof. I don't hardly feel them, but David thought it would be safer if we started right away."

"David's right," said Mrs. Brown. "David will take care of you."

"I'll say he will." Miss Jellife's agreement was robust. "He's one grand fellow. They don't come like that very often."

"Not often," Mrs. Brown said softly. Claudia did not have to see her mother's face to know that she was smiling. She bent and brushed her lips across the quiet forehead. "You feel nice and cool," she said. "By the time I come home again, you'll be walking around the garden."

Mrs. Brown nodded. "I bet you twenty cents," she whispered.

The pains tore through her. David drove like mad. "Are they very bad?" he asked—just as her mother had asked.

"I want them to be bad," she gasped. "It keeps me from thinking."

All that day and through the night, the violence of birth possessed her body and loosed her soul into the great unknown. The baby came at dawn and then there was a return to life and, with the return, a great peace that was akin to happiness.

She opened her eyes. David stood beside her. He tried to smile. "Another boy, darling."

"Tell Mamma—" Her eyes drooped. "No, don't. She knows——"

CHAPTER TEN

THIS IS MY KINGDOM

THEY called the second baby Matthew. It sounded like a family name, but it wasn't. Claudia just liked it and David said it was better than Peter, anyway, as so many babies were called Peter these days. They'd had quite an argument about a name because they had "Mary" all picked out for a girl. When it turned out to be another boy, Claudia wanted to call him David, after her favourite husband, but David said that first thing they knew they'd be calling him Junior. Claudia said not at all, they'd call him Young David, but David didn't like that either. He said it sounded like a thin, sensitive lad in a bad English novel. "How about calling him Claude after my first wife?" he suggested. Which was how they came to settle on Matthew.

Claudia found that second babies fell into an entirely different category from first babies. To begin with, everything the poor child had was a hand-me-down from Bobby, except for a couple of dozen new nappies and four new belly-bands, and, of course, gifts which were practically without exception, fancy caps or little frilly dresses. From past experience, Claudia knew that elaborate clothing was extremely unbecoming to an infant, so she wrapped them all up again, ready to hand on as baby presents to her friends. Mrs. Riddle very sweetly sent a silver pusher, which Claudia put away also, as she'd found that a piece of bread or zwelback worked even better, and didn't need polishing. The two most sensible presents that Matthew received were a pair of beautiful old Chinese figures for the living-room mantel from Roger, and a hundred-dollar cheque from Julia and Hartley—which David immediately put into pigs. Julia said severely that she thought that that would happen, so she gave Claudia five dollars extra, and Claudia bought Matthew some expensive cod liver oil which contained the very latest vitamin. The doctor had ordered it because the poor darling, along with everything else he wasn't getting, didn't have any mother's milk either.

Claudia worried about this. She not only worried about it, but the fact that she wasn't able to nurse Matthew gave her an inferiority complex, even though the doctor assured her that it was no reflection on her ability whatsoever. "You've sustained a severe nervous shock, my dear young lady," he told her. He alluded, of course, to her mother's death, but out of what he thought to be great kindness, he avoided mentioning it directly. During those long days at the hospital everyone, even the floor nurses, had been most kind and gentle with her. Losing a mother seemed a very natural, passing sorrow to most people, but the fact that her mother had died while Claudia was in labour lent a certain degree of tragedy to an otherwise normal human incident. The patient in the room opposite sent some of her personal flowers the following day with sympathy, and Julia, tiptoeing in a little later, bent over Claudia and kissed her as if she really meant it. "Oh, my dear," she murmured, "words are so futile. What can I say to comfort you?"

Claudia felt like a hypocrite. She did not need comfort, for she didn't feel any grief or unhappiness. Everyone thought that she had lost her mother, but it wasn't true. Her mother was just as alive as ever, and Claudia treasured the knowledge secretly and exultantly. It sounded crazy, but she knew it for a fact—she had found it out while she was having the baby. First, for hour after hour, there had been pain—only pain—then, all at once, she was not a part of her tortured body. It lay upon the bed and she was somewhere else, close by, yet far away. She felt very happy and free. She turned and there was her mother, standing beside her, looking just as Claudia remembered her in those old pictures taken twenty years before.

"This is wonderful!" cried Claudia.

"Yes," her mother had smiled, "this is wonderful."

Claudia couldn't remember what happened after that, but when she opened her eyes, she was lying back on the bed and there was no longer any pain. Her mother was there—Claudia knew it, even though she could not see her. She could only see David, bending over her. She was glad that he was with her. She wanted to tell him how happy she was, but she was very tired and instead, she fell asleep.

When the baby was a week old, Bobby came in from the country to visit her. Bertha brought him. She had scrubbed him shiny and slicked his hair so neatly to his temples that he looked grown up and a little wan. Quickly, Claudia ruffled back his bang to its accustomed tousle.

He ducked. "Don't do that," he said reproachfully. He was proud of the tidy, mannish parting. "Is Grandma here?"

Bertha said, "Hush, Bobby."

"But you said she went away to another house."

"She did, darling," Claudia told him. "She sent you her love and said to tell you that she loves her new home, and doesn't have to stay in her bed the way she used to."

"Is she walking around?"

"Yes, she's walking around."

"Look, my boy, what beautiful flowers," Bertha broke in, clearing her throat.

"And lovely fruit," said Claudia. "Could he have a few of those hothouse grapes, Bertna?"

Bertha couldn't bring herself to spoil the perfection of the bunch even for Bobby, but Claudia said if you took from underneath, it wouldn't show, and besides, they were just a racket. "Give me an ordinary grape any day of the week," she said.

This hinted of heresy to Bertha, to whom hothouse grapes were synonymous with royalty. She said, "Better he eats a prune, anyhow." She was a strong believer in prunes, and felt that she was stealing a march on Bobby, who was quite misled by the resplendent silver paper. "Don't swallow the pip," she cautioned him suavely. "Give Bertha."

Bobby chewed the confection with a vaguely bemused expression, and then graciously condescended to spit the pip into Bertha's waiting palm.

"So," said Bertha, satisfied.

"Were you such a fool about your own children, Bertha?"

Bertha admitted that she was. "And the new baby—Ach, Mr. David said he was something beautiful."

"Did he really? He pretends not to be in the least excited about him. Wait till you see him. I'll ring for the nurse to bring him in."

"Ach," said Bertha, clasping her hands.

She thought he was the most remarkable baby she had ever laid eyes on. She carried it a little too far, because Matthew wasn't as good as all that. In the first place, he'd developed a very unbecoming rash ("Is nothing but heat," Bertha tossed it aside), and, in the second place, he'd lost two ounces in changing to the proper formula.

"I can't nurse him, Bertha."

"Don't worry. He grows up big and fat just the same."

"Did you ever not nurse any of your children?"

Bertha had to confess that such a situation had at no time arisen

in her own particular case. "I had so much, I gave also to other babies," she modestly recalled.

Claudia sighed with envy. She told David about it that evening. "Bertha was a remarkable woman in her prime," she said.

David said he wasn't interested in Bertha's prime, he was only interested in the sum total of Bertha's two hundred pounds of current functioning. "How do you feel about trusting her?" he demanded abruptly.

"About trusting her?" Claudia indignantly repeated. "David, what's the matter with you? I'd trust her a lot sooner than I'd trust myself."

"Good," said David. "That's all I wanted to know. We're going to spend this winter in New York, and the boys"—he stopped to grin over the way it sounded—"are going to stay on the farm with Bertha and Fritz."

Claudia sat straight up in bed, although she wasn't supposed to, and David immediately pushed her back again like a ninepin. "Close your mouth, darling," he said. "It's not becoming."

"You're mad," she informed him flatly. "Stark, staring, raving mad."

"And why?"

"Because you don't leave a new-born infant to a perfect stranger."

"So now Bertha's a perfect stranger?"

"As far as blood goes—definitely."

"Since when are you so devoted to blood? You never see a relative from one year to the next."

"Nevertheless, blood is important in a case like this."

"I'm no blood relation of yours," he pointed out.

"Yes, and who said I'd leave the children with you? You'd ruin them."

"I'd make men of them." His lips set into a firm line as if already he savoured the heady satisfaction of inculcating independence and responsibility in his sons. "I'd prepare them for meeting life and not being tied to apron strings."

"Meaning I tie them——?"

"Meaning you do—you won't even let Bobby slide down the banisters."

"I should say I won't! And have him break his neck!"

"If he broke it once, he'd learn not to break it again."

"Oh, David, you're impossible! Have you no father love at all?"

"Not if those brats are going to mess up our marriage."

"As if they could."

"You'd be surprised how they could."

"I know what you mean. But I won't be that way. Not even if I have to go back to the stage to keep me from it."

One eyebrow slid up his forehead.

"Well, not *back*, but *on*," she amended.

"I don't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"That you won't be that way. You're even afraid to stay in New York and let Bertha take care of them."

"That's different."

"Why is it different?"

"Because I know why you want me to stay. You think that going home is going to bring everything back. You want me to wait until I'm stronger."

"Nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. You're frightfully sweet, David. But——" she hesitated.

"But what?" His question was an admission.

Now was the time to talk to him. She wondered how to begin. It wasn't easy. It was never easy for them to touch on serious matters, seriously. It was because they were so deeply attuned, she supposed. Being serious with people was a perfunctory exercising of the intellect. With love, it was only feelings that counted.

"But what?" he pressed her gently.

She glanced at her supper tray on the table—cold sliced chicken, aspic salad, a baked apple—"Wait until the nurse comes for it"

The nurse came. "Dear me," she deplored, "you didn't eat enough to keep a bird alive."

"Hospital food has no magnetism," said Claudia.

The nurse, who had no magnetism either, wasn't certain what Claudia meant, so she just repeated, "Dear me," and carried the tray away.

Claudia said, "She lives with a girl friend, who's also a nurse and just had her tonsils out—David, do you believe in death?"

David lit his pipe, trying to catch up with her. "Does my smoking bother you?"

"After all these years, does your smoking bother me—David, do you?"

"What do you mean, believe in it?"

"I mean do you think that when you die, you're dead?"

He did not answer immediately. He wanted to say, "No," she could see that. But because he was honest with her, he finally said, "Yes."

She nodded. "That's what I used to think. But Mamma is

just as alive as if she were right here in this room. She is right here in this room."

David took her hand. She pulled away. "You think I'm imagining things, don't you?" she accused him.

"I think those we love live on in our memory."

"That's a piker's way of looking at it."

"Then I'm a piker."

"You don't like to believe anything that might make you think you're soft."

"I don't like soft thinking, if that's what you mean."

They weren't getting anywhere. David was always like that—always listening to his mind, always mistrusting emotion and substituting logic in its place. Wanting proof, cold hard proof. Well, she'd give him proof. She told him at last what had happened, trembling a little as the profound and stirring beauty of the experience swept back over her. He listened, not saying anything, even when she had finished. "Perhaps you think it was a dream under ether," she suggested unsteadily.

"That's been know to happen, darling."

"And the feeling that persists, the sense that she is still around—what about that?"

"I think that, too, must often happen when we lose someone we love."

She was silent.

He put his arms around her. "I don't want to rob you of any solace, darling. I just want you to keep your feet firmly on this earth. Mother would be the first to want you to, you know."

"She said that—it all comes to me now—she didn't really say it, I suppose, but I seemed to hear her say that I was a channel—that I was to be to my children what she had been to me. Only to make a better job of it. I remember her smiling when she said that, David—her old, funny little smile—"

"Don't, darling—"

It was evident that he was pained and somewhat ill at ease about her. She wished that he could rejoice with her, and have confidence in her sanity. This was a kind of crossroads in their lives. She could see that clearly. She could formulate the basic problems that confronted them.

She wondered whether such lucidity sprang from the fact that she had, herself, so recently been loosed into the unknowable realm beyond the stars. To have a baby is to know life and death at once. She and her mother had travelled the same road for a space. But her mother had stayed and Claudia had returned—wiser and calmer, and with knowledge in her being. It

was as simple as that. Yet it was hard to make David see what had really happened. The stardust that she carried back with her frightened him a little. He wanted to guard her from the sharp, despairing impact of a loss which he felt to be only half realised. He loved her too well, held her too closely within the protection of that love.

"David," she said. "I want to go home. I need to go home."

He must have understood a little, because he bent and kissed her. "All right, darling," he said.

The nurse bustled in carrying the baby. She saw the kiss and tactfully pretended not to. "I brought the little man to see his papa," she cried, being whimsical about it.

She placed the bundle of Matthew in David's arms. David looked down upon his sleeping son. "Homely little mug," he muttered huskily.

The doctor dismissed Claudia from the hospital at the end of the third week. The extra week meant that they wouldn't have to take the nurse home with them and they both thought that it was worth it, as she had such a whiney voice.

David installed a heater in the car for the drive out to the country. Claudia complimented him on the paternal gesture, but he scowled and said that it was for her and not for the brat. "Let him get hardened to weather," he sternly ordained.

"We might let him ride outside in the luggage rack," Claudia proposed, but David said he could ride inside if he behaved himself.

"He smells so sweet," she breathed ecstatically, and cuddled him up against her.

David said, "I only hope he continues to do so until we get there."

She regarded her sleeping son with pride. The last ten days had made all the difference in the world to his complexion and his hands. His hands were beautiful. "Your hands," Claudia said, arranging the small, perfect fingers one by one. "He's going to be an architect like you, too."

"Doctor," David corrected. "Those are surgeon's hands."

"Maybe he'll just turn out to be a bum," said Claudia cheerfully.

"That's possible."

"Would you mind awfully?"

"Not if he was a first-rate bum."

She sighed. "Remember how we made up our minds that Bobby was going to be president? Second babies get a terrible break."

"All first babies are going to be presidents," said David. "Second babies get a swell break."

Fritz was raking leaves from the lawn when they drove up. He dropped his rake and hurried to meet them. Bertha rushed to the front door with Bobby, and the dogs appeared from nowhere, barking and cavorting. Across the meadows, red-gold with early autumn, Claudia could see Louella and her calf. It seemed as though they stopped their grazing to look over toward the road.

"Look!" cried David. "The sheep are coming through the orchard. They seem to know we're here."

"This," thought Claudia, "is our kingdom." In one perfect translucent moment, she possessed all that lay before her. She possessed David, and Bobby, and the baby. They were all hers. And then in that same moment, she realised, with submission, that she possessed nothing and no one. Everything could be taken from her in the way that her mother had been taken from her. Yet life could not take away this moment. It belonged to her, it gave her possession for all time. No matter what happened, no matter what came, she had touched the ultimate potential of her being. It was almost as if, in the fullness of possession, she could release possession. It was like holding close, with open hands.

David said, "Darling—" and pushed her gently toward the steps. He was fearful of what she was thinking. He was fearful that she was remembering how it had been with Bobby—her mother at the doorway offering security and welcome. "That was the first baby," Claudia told herself above the pain of memory. "I needed her. This is the second baby. I can stand by myself." She pressed David's arm reassuringly. "I feel fine," she said.

It was the first time since they had bought the house that she had been away from it for more than a day or two. She walked into the living-room. It seemed at once larger and smaller, and the same and different, than when she had left. She moved about, loving everything all over again. In her absence Fritz had waxed the old oak floors until they looked like wide panels of pale-brown velvet laid side by side, and had polished the brasses until they shone like gold. There were flowers, too—flowers everywhere. Bertha had stripped the last of the garden and had enlisted bowls and jars, and even water pitchers, to hold the masses of lusty zinnias and delicate asters. Bertha was perfect, except that she had no *flair* for arranging flowers. She had no *flair* for placing furniture either, her youth having been firmly influenced by the school of katty-korner. Automatically, Claudia lifted some languishing blooms from the crowded neck of a fragile

Bristol vase, and pushed a Chippendale chair against the wall. "The place has missed me," she thought contentedly.

Although it wasn't in the least necessary, David carried her up to her room. She pretended to adore it, because she thought it would please him if she adored it. But either he was older than he'd been five years ago, or she was heavier or the early stairs were much too steep for such romanticism—at any rate, it was the most uncomfortable two minutes she'd ever spent, with her legs dangling and his arm pressing like a band of steel against her waist.

"You're choking me," he gasped when they were half-way up. "Let go my neck!"

"You've got the shoe on the wrong foot, my dear fellow," Claudia informed him coldly. "This idea is not successful, put me down. I have to look after the baby, anyway."

"The baby's managing very nicely with Bertha," he replied and struggled on until he plopped her down on her own bed. She didn't admit it, but it was good to be there. She didn't even protest too violently when Bertha announced that she was sleeping in the nursery. "Just this one night," she conceded.

Bertha, however, asked no questions and continued to sleep in the nursery. Claudia's conscience bothered her. "In the first place," she pointed out to David one evening, as he was opening the windows before hopping into bed, "it's my baby and it's only right for me to be up with him."

"Nonsense. Bertha enjoys it," David argued. "She told me she'd been looking forward to being with him nights."

"I don't see how she can," Claudia murmured elliptically.

For once in his life, David, who knew so much about everything, was stumped. He couldn't imagine either.

"Maybe when you're old——"

David shook his head and said that age has nothing to do with it. "Bes des," he said "Fritz isn't old and Bertha's only fifty."

"She's awfully fat," Claudia pondered. "Would you love me if I weighed two hundred pounds?"

He nodded gloomily.

"What about when I have false teeth,"

"Yes, and when your hair falls out, too. It'll be a habit by then."

"I'll wear a wig," she promised. "I'll get the very best upper-and-lower that I can and never take them out nights."

"That'll help," he said.

"Of course, you won't be an Adonis yourself," she reminded him. "You'll get bald and have a big stomach like your brother."

"Not on your life," he indignantly denied.

"You probably won't be rich enough to paunch. You'll be one of those leathery, lean old men," She squinted at him. "I shouldn't be surprised if I loved you more than ever when you're that way——"

David immediately became pedagogic. "That's the way nature works it," he pointed out.

"Then——" Claudia paused and frowned.

"I don't know," he admitted helplessly. "Except, doesn't the baby get a two o'clock bottle?"

"Certainly not."

"Bobby did."

"Yes, but second babies don't."

"Why not?"

"They're supposed to sleep right through and like it."

"Oh, well," said David relieved, "if he sleeps right through, then Bertha and Fritz can visit. Move over."

"True," said Claudia, as she shifted six inches toward the left. "But personally I wouldn't care for the arrangement."

"Nor me," said David.

Bertha, however, seemed to thrive on taking full charge of Matthew, and wore the look of a Madonna. Fritz didn't seem to mind, either. He was very proud that Bertha hadn't forgotten how to handle a little baby and took to calling her "Mamma." One rainy night Claudia came into the kitchen to find him hanging Matthew's laundry on an impromptu line strung up from tubs to window.

"Oh, Fritz!" she protested.

"It comes down tomorrow morning," he explained apologetically.

"It isn't that, but doesn't all this sort of thing bother you?"

"Ach," said Fritz with a broad smile, "it's like old times when little Hans was born and Mamma and me was young."

"The whole thing in a nutshell," Claudia reported to David, "is that Fritz and Bertha are spiritual."

"Or just a little cracked," said David, with a wealth of affection in his voice.

Bertha's methods, of course, were slightly antiquated—most of them dating from the same little Hans. She changed the formula without asking the doctor and picked Matthew up whenever he cried—which wasn't very often. "Bertha's *kleine engel*," she would croon, hoisting him capably over her plump shoulder, where, goggle-eyed and content, he would attempt to hold erect a vio-

lently palsied head. "Ach, is he not wonderful?" she would appeal to Claudia.

Claudia tried not to hurt Bertha's feelings, but candidly she could never bring herself to rave over Matthew at these moments of activity. "He's darling when he's asleep," she compromised.

"He is darling all the time," Bertha would insist, kissing his little wrist, which was better than kissing his cheek, but not strictly sanitary either.

"Do you think I ought to worry about it?" Claudia appealed to David.

David said she'd have a nerve to, what with Matthew gaining steadily, and further pointed out that little Hans was now a six-foot giant with a family of his own. "You're just old-fashioned," he denounced her.

"You're crazy, I'm modern—it's Bertha that's old fashioned."

"Don't fool yourself," said David.

The issue came unexpectedly to a head the following Monday, when David arrived home with the startling announcement that he would have to be in Los Angeles before Saturday to attend a convention of the American Society of Architects.

Claudia was so stunned she couldn't say anything for a moment. "Let Roger go," she finally brought out. "You don't like conventions."

"I know it, but one of us has to be there and Roger isn't feeling up to the trip."

"Neither are you. You just had a baby."

"Darling, don't be a goop. I'm planning to stay on out there a few weeks and it'll be a nice vacation for both of us."

"For both of who?"

"For both of who do you think?"

She stared at him. "Not me, you don't mean?"

"I'd like to know who I do mean if I don't mean you?"

She wet her lips. Her voice sounded like a croak in her ears. "David. I couldn't. I wouldn't."

"What do you mean you wouldn't?" he demanded.

She felt like crying. "Well, use your head. If I wouldn't leave a new baby to live in New York, I'm certainly not going to put an ocean between us."

"There's no ocean," David pointed out reasonably. "You're thinking of Europe."

"It's just as bad. It's a whole continent—ninety-six states."

"Forty-eight," he corrected patiently, "and you don't have to cross all of them." His anger flared. "And even if you did, why in hell not?"

"Because I'm a mother," she informed him dramatically.

"You were a wife before you were a mother."

"That was a mere sop to convention. Don't yell at me."

"I will yell at you! You're a little fool! You don't know a good husband when you have one and you haven't got sense enough to try to keep him."

He was only half in earnest, but it was a strange thing for him to say, and it struck a new and ominous note in their relationship. "I should think," she said, deeply wounded, "you'd have cause to complain if I marched off and shirked my responsibilities."

"What do you think children are? A lifetime sentence of imprisonment?"

"So your marriage has been a prison to you." Her voice broke. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise."

"Don't pull that actress stuff, my girl, I'm on to it."

She stamped her foot. "*Will* you stop shouting at me!"

David grinned. "That's more natural." He pulled her into a rough embrace. "Look here, you chump, don't you think I'd be the first person to tell you if it wasn't right for you to leave the youngsters with Bertha and Fritz?"

"Frankly, no," said Claudia. "You're much more fond of me than you are of them."

"And you're much more fond of them than you are of me," he followed up, with a hurt, sulky look on his face, like Bobby.

Her heart went out to him. "Oh, David, darling, you know that isn't true. But they're so helpless."

"So am I without you."

"David—you're making it awfully hard for me. I can't. I just can't."

He looked at her and saw by her white face that she wasn't acting. He took out his pipe and filled it. "That's too bad," he said quietly, and she saw that he wasn't acting either.

She laughed shakily. "This must be mid-channel, or something of the sort."

There was silence. "David——"

"Yes?"

"Don't you see, I'm just not built that way?"

"That's all right," he said. "Forget it."

They didn't discuss it again and, for some reason, it didn't enter her head that he would go without her—that it was imperative for him to attend the convention. He said casually, the next evening. "I bought my ticket for the four o'clock plane on Thursday."

She could only stare at him with her blood turning watery in her veins and an all-gone feeling in her stomach. He ruffled her hair. "Don't look so tragic, darling."

Her lips moved woodenly. "But you musn't fly, planes explode and drop and all sorts of horrible things——"

"Don't be a jack. If I'm supposed to——"

"Yes, I know all that," she broke in. "If you're supposed to get killed, you'll get killed crossing the street. That's all very pretty in theory."

"Claudia, you neurotic, I've always travelled by plane."

"Not since we've been married."

"That's because I haven't budged from home in the past five years."

There it was again—that faint note of restlessness and impatience. In all fairness, she couldn't blame him. He was a man and she was a woman, and the things that satisfied her could not be expected to satisfy him. He needed to get away from the endless round of domesticity, and now that the second baby was here he could feel the net tightening around him, deadening his energies, robbing him of the challenge of the outside world. She remembered the moment of vision and enlightenment that had come to her the day she'd returned from the hospital and she tried to reach for it again. "I must let him go, I mustn't possess him, I mustn't hold on——"

"If I fly," he pursued, "I can be back in half the time——"

"If you come back alive," she answered, the terror in her heart. Aloud she said, "I'll try not to worry. I'm glad you're going, you need a vacation."

"It won't be much of a one without you."

She couldn't resist sounding him out. "I imagine you'll have a much better time if I'm not tied around your neck," she suggested lightly.

"Don't be silly."

She had expected a much more vehement denial. But that was all he said, "Don't be silly."

A little later he came out with, "Fritz had better press my tails."

"Tails?"

"I'll be needing them."

David looked stunning in tails—definitely a man and not a waiter. She could see him—young and handsome and distinguished. She bit her lips to hold back a sigh. "David," she began. "if Mamma were only here to look after things it would be different."

"No, it wouldn't. You'd have three people to worry about instead of two. It's in your blood, Claudia, you're a congenital worrier."

"What am I going to do about it?" she asked desperately.

"Get over it."

"How?"

"Just break through." His tone changed and he put his arm around her. "Darling, I'm sorry. It's wrong to try to change you when your world's been knocked from under you. I wish to God I didn't have to leave you now."

"I'll be all right."

"Why don't you have Helen out?"

"Helen's having another affair. Anyway, I'll have plenty to do, what with a new baby in the house." But she knew that she wouldn't have plenty to do and that the hours would drag by one by one, empty and lonely and haunted by the knowledge that she had only herself to thank for whatever rift might spring between herself and David. "Yet I know I'm right," she kept quieting her conflict. "If anything happened to Bobby or the baby while I was away, I'd never forgive myself."

David didn't ment on the trip the next morning. He appeared to take for granted that she had made up her mind not to go with him, and to dismiss the matter as settled. Which was all very well, except that he might have shown a little more regret in facing their first real separation.

She chided him for it at breakfast. It wasn't an ideal time for chiding, as no matter how early his alarm clock rang, there was always a last-minute dash for the train. He gulped down his coffee, and picked a grape from the fruit bowl before he answered. In the middle of a swallow, he said cheerfully, "Do us good to get a little rest from each other—all married people need a little rest from each other."

She almost fell over with the shock of it, but she managed to smile brightly and answer, "Absolutely." She was really so hurt, however, that she added, "I think I'll let Fritz take you to the station this morning." He said, "That's sensible." Then, at the last minute, she decided not to be sensible and she said, "Oh, well, I'll run you down."

He had to drive so fast in order to make his train that there wasn't much opportunity for intelligent conversation. The car swept down the depot hill at the very instant the whistle sounded around the curve. David looked pleased, just as if he'd done something marvellous. "How's that for timing?" he demanded.

He tilted her head and dropped a kiss on her nose. "I'll be on the 5.53 unless you hear from me."

"Listen——"

"What?"

"Have you forgotten you're going to California tomorrow?"

"I haven't forgotten. Why?"

"Oh, nothing——"

He hung back, although the train had already pulled to a noisy stop. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Only you might kiss me as if you meant it—— Hurry! It's moving, you'll miss it! Oh, David, that hurts!"

He caught the last car on a run. It took ten years off her life to watch him. He had kissed her all right—she still felt the results of it like a bruise on her cheek. But even though it had hurt, there wasn't an iota of passion in it. It was a school-boy's kiss, rough and exuberant; and left her completely unwarmed and even a little angry. "Who does he think I am to kiss me like that?" she muttered.

When she arrived home, Bertha had already washed up the breakfast dishes and was about to make the beds. "Wouldn't you like me to bath the baby for you?" Claudia inquired.

"Ach, no thank you." Bertha was appreciative but firm. She eyes Claudia speculatively, "I have some peas to shell," she suggested in the same persuasive tone she might have used towards Bobby if she wanted to divert him.

"Shelling peas is really very inferior stimulation," said Claudia. "Bertha, you do think I'm right in not leaving the children to go with Mr. David, don't you?"

Bertha lifted the mattress and turned it like nothing. "If you are going to worry, you are right," she answered.

"But wouldn't you worry?"

"If I didn't have someone to leave them with that I could trust, yah, I would worry," said Bertha, with a detachment that didn't blow her own horn, but merely stated a fact.

"It isn't that, Bertha."

"I know," said Bertha understandingly. "I would be the same way. Only it's hard on Mr. David, not?"

"It will be good for Mr. David to get off by himself for once in a blue moon."

Bertha tucked the sheet in at the corners like a trained nurse. "Such new-fashioned talk I don't believe in," she declared. "A husband and a wife belong together."

"So does a mother and her children."

"Yah," said Bertha. "That's true, too."

"You're not much of a help." Claudia turned away with a sigh. "Anyway," she threw back over her shoulder, "I'm not going, so there's no sense talking."

"Yah," said Bertha. "Maybe we put the baby outside today. Fritz says the weather is beautiful for a change."

"I didn't notice," said Claudia.

She walked to the window. She saw that the sun was out, making deep shadows over the grass, and that the trees didn't stir. Only occasionally, a full-coloured leaf wafted indeterminedly through the air to settle gently and reluctantly to the ground.

"It is nice out," she discovered. "Stop clawing that lilac, Shakespeare!" She knocked violently on the pane. Shakespeare looked up, crouching. Tentatively he dug his nails once more into the bark, his back humped and his tail waving in sheer impudence. Claudia knocked again. The dogs came, thinking that someone was calling them. The cat evaporated beneath the rhododendrons and they went looking for him. "Heavens, they're trampling down everything," exclaimed Claudia. "I could die."

"Remember," Bertha wooed her, "how excited we were when you took Bobby out for the first time?"

Claudia's thoughts went back over the years. Yes, she had been excited. The stunning new perambulator, the monogrammed carriage robe, the new coat with its sweet cape collar embroidered minutely with sprays of tiny flowers. Matthew would wear the same coat, without the collar; he would be placed in the old perambulator with much of its paint scuffed off; he would use the identical robe, a little shrunken and faded. "You don't get so excited over second babies," said Claudia.

It was nevertheless rather wonderful to see the carriage on the lawn—where no carriage had been before. It made Bobby feel very important and it made the dogs feel important, and it even made Claudia feel important. Fritz came around and peeked beneath the hood. "He's asleep," he whispered.

"He sleeps until noon," Bertha prophesied complacently. "He's a beautiful baby, not?"

"Not so very, with a cap on," said Claudia honestly.

"Ach, yes, beautiful," Fritz insisted, "just like little Hans was, no, Mamma?"

"Hansie was not so gorgeous, he was only healthy. Hansie didn't have such a good nose, like this baby."

Claudia suddenly missed her mother with a sharp pang of agony. She, too, would have thought Matthew very beautiful on his first airing. Tears formed a lump in her throat and her heart

grew sick with futile longing. "These moments will come and go," she thought. "I have to learn to bear with them."

A figure strode past the house. Claudia glanced up. Through a mist of tears she saw the bent head, the long gait, the hands plunged deep in pockets. He was already down the road before she could steady her voice to turn to Fritz. "Fritz," she asked, as indifferently as she could, "wasn't that Mr. Seymour?"

"Yah," said Fritz briefly. "He is in the brown house again." Fritz's tone held a note of disapproval. It was evident that he remembered Mr. Seymour with considerable distrust. "Every day almost he walks to the bridge and back. He hasn't got much work to do, I guess."

"He writes. He comes up here to write. He's a writer."

"Writing is nothing," Bertha stated. "Well, I hurry inside now and get lunch ready. Fritz, listen for the little one. If he cries, call me."

"I'll watch him," Claudia offered.

She kept an ear on the baby and an eye on the road. In a little while, she saw Mr. Jerry Seymour swing into sight again. Naturally she was going to talk to him—why not? It was the only neighbourly thing to do and besides, she was interested. He'd simply disappeared after that ridiculous misunderstanding last winter, and although she'd often imagined herself meeting him on the street in New York, or at the theatre, she never had. She wandered over toward the picket gate. "Yoo-hoo!" she called and nonchalantly waved her hand.

She caught him just in time. He looked up and back, and then came to a stop.

"Why, hello there," he said slowly. He seemed a little unsure of himself, as if the awkwardness of their last meeting still hung over him.

"Hello," she said, "up here again?"

He moved toward her. "Hello, there," he repeated with a lot more inflection. He put out his hand over the gate. "Fancy seeing you here."

"This happens to be where I live," she replied crisply.

"What I mean to say is, I haven't seen you before. Yes, I'm here. Until Christmas."

"I've been away, that's why. How's the novel?"

"I'm doing a play."

"Oh."

"And how've you been?"

"Fine."

"You're looking well." His eyes appraised her.

"I'm feeling well."

"Good."

It was hard to think of anything to say after that. "You're looking extremely well," he qualified.

She was going to repeat that she was feeling extremely well, but she thought it would be silly.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Bobby appeared upon the scene with a request to climb a tree.

"Certainly not," said Claudia.

"Why?"

"Because you don't know how." She pushed up his hat, which had slipped over his forehead like a handbox, and straightened his ears against his head where they belonged. "Where's your hanky?" she whispered.

"I haven't got any."

"Run in the house for one—quickski!"

She hoped that adding the "ski" would soften the urgency of her desire to be rid of him, for he was nothing to be proud of at the moment. But the "ski" only made him think that she didn't mean what she said, so she had to give him a little push that carried all the psychic implications of a pinch. "Go on in to Bertha."

He moved off unwillingly. He gave a sloppy sneeze and she was thankful that his back was turned. "Oh, dear," she thought, "I hope he isn't getting a cold."

Mr. Scymour's voice broke in upon her. "Unattractive little chap," he remarked. "Don't you find it a nuisance?"

Claudia froze. "Find what a nuisance?"

"I mean—I think it's awfully nice of you to bother with the youngster."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" she ironically agreed.

"Is that hers, too?" He nodded toward the carriage.

"Is that whose, too?"

"Your maid's or housekeeper's—the stout lady I see about with the nice round face."

"No," said Claudia tersely. "It's mine."

He frowned. "What's yours?"

"Both. What's in the perambulator and what's nose is running."

"My God," he said and added flatly, "I don't believe it."

"Why shouldn't they be mine?"

"You must have been married in India."

She didn't get the connection. "No. New York. Why? Do I look like an Indian?"

"You look about sixteen. You never told me you had children."

"I'm twenty-three. You never asked me."

"You never even told me you had a husband. Until he appeared on the scene."

She flushed. "That was purely a regrettable accident—I mean, that you didn't realise it."

"A regrettable accident that he appeared, too. How is he, by the way?"

"Oh, fine. He's leaving for California tomorrow." She mentioned it because it was the thing that was uppermost in her thoughts, but after she said it she could have kicked herself around the corner.

"Splendid" cried Mr. Jerry Seymour and laughed out aloud. "My dear Claudia, you're marvellous. You've got me right back to where I was before. What are you and why are you?"

"I'm not," she stammered. "I mean, I'm not anything."

"But you are—you're very much. You're a damned attractive woman."

There was no mistaking the old admiration which came into his eyes. She couldn't help thrilling to it. She'd thought that when a woman had borne two children it was practically the end of her decorative function in life. Instead, according to the way Mr. Jerry Seymour was acting, it was more apt to be the beginning—that is, if you kept your figure. Of course, he wasn't a criterion, because he happened to be the sort of young man who didn't like young girls—he liked women. Claudia remembered that he had told her, on that memorable evening that she had had dinner with him, that he wasn't a marrying man, but that like Benjamin Franklin, if he ever did marry, he'd marry a widow. "For goodness sake, why?" she'd demanded. But even when he'd explained, she hadn't quite grasped the point.

"Don't you want to see the baby?" she asked quickly.

"Not really," he said frankly. "Must I?"

"By no means," she replied with straight lips. "However, he's a very beautiful child and you're missing a lot."

"I'd be amazed if he weren't beautiful."

Claudia felt a shiver run deliciously down her back. "I have to go," she said.

"Oh, no, don't go." His dark and undeniably handsome face actually fell. Then he smiled—and Claudia remembered his smile, which did such nice things to his eyes. "Tell me about yourself," he begged. "Have you done anything on the stage this year?"

She shook her head.

"Just stayed on here?"

She nodded.

"That's utterly immoral. You ought to be living——" (He made the word "living" sound very important.)

"I am living," she replied, but the way she said it, it only sounded like a verb.

"No, you're not," he denied gravely. "You have to go out and find life. It doesn't come up a country road, knocking at the door."

"It came up the road knocking at mine," said Claudia simply. "I had a baby and I lost my mother."

"I'm sorry. About your mother, I mean. But, of course, that isn't life."

"What would you call it?"

"Not——" he stumbled about a little. "Not *great* life. Not the stuff that great people are made of. Or great plays. Or great books."

"Is that what you're looking for, when you stride about with your hands in your pockets and your eyes closed? Well, I bet you twenty cents you never write a great book or play until you take your hands out of your pockets and walk like everybody else."

He flushed a little. "One can't help one's personal mannerisms."

She had the grace to flush, too. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. As a matter of fact, I like the way you walk," she confessed in a burst.

"Do you?"

"Well, I don't mean 'like it' exactly," she floundered. "I mean, it—it's rather attractive. Like an actor's walk on a stage."

"You know I can never tell when you're flattering me or poking fun at me."

"That's part of my charm," said Claudia.

"You're damned right it's part of your charm," he agreed. "Did anybody ever tell you you had quite a lot of the stuff?"

"Oh, yes." David often said that part of her charm was being dumb, or crazy, or something of the sort.

"Look here," he switched abruptly, "when am I going to see you?"

Fritz hove into sight before she could answer. "I thought I heard the baby crying," he explained.

"The baby's all right," said Claudia.

Fritz lingered to cut off some shrub branches that the dogs had

tramped on. Fritz always did things as they came up—never put them off—which was why he was such a perfect gardener and farmer. Now it took him quite a long time to trim the shrubs to his satisfaction, and as there didn't seem to be anything more to talk about, Claudia said, "Well, goodbye, Mr. Seymour."

Fritz snipped off the last twig at that point and went back to the barn.

"Why the Mr. Seymour?" Jerry inquired rather intensely as soon as the blue overalls had disappeared around the house. "Aren't we old friends? Aren't we going to see each other again?"

He held out his hand and Claudia, like a fool, thought that he was intending to say good-bye, so she held out hers. But he didn't shake it; he just kept it and covered it with both his own, like a sandwich. She almost fainted, for the funniest thing in the world happened to her in that instant. Mr. Jerry Seymour's touch supplied the very feeling that she had missed in David's good-bye kiss at the station. Her head felt light and dizzy, as if it were going to waft right off her shoulders, and at the same time she felt warm and tremulous and immensely happy. She tried to pull away but he held on for dear life. "Lunch is ready," she gasped.

He lifted her fingers to his lips. "Au'voir," he said in a low voice, and swung off up the road.

Claudia stood looking after him. She had always thought that when anyone said that a heart fluttered it was merely a figure of speech. But it wasn't. Within her breast there was a sensation of a hundred tiny wings, whispering and moving, as if they would escape to lift her off the ground. When she was about Bobby's age she'd always tried to fly, like Peter Pan. Now she was quite certain that if she tried again the miracle would happen. She had only to stretch her arms, stand on her tip-toes and jump off without fear into space.

"This is love," she thought in wonder. "I'm in love."

She found herself running towards the house, with her feet scarcely touching the earth. She rushed into the kitchen where Bertha was sitting down shelling the peas. ("Oh dear, what a lazy slob, I didn't do it for her," Claudia remembered.) She flung her arms around Bertha's shoulders and put her face against Bertha's cheek. "Bertha, guess what!" she cried. "I'm going to California!"

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. She called up the airport and, to her bitter disappointment, there wasn't a seat left on the four o'clock plane for the following day. She put the telephone back

on the desk. "All taken," she told Bertha, who was waiting eagerly by her side. "There may be a cancellation, but they won't know until ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Ach," mourned Bertha. She brightened. "You pack your clothes anyway. Somebody doesn't go at the last minute, you'll see."

"Bertha," said Claudia, "I'm superstitious—that means something that all people in the theatre are," she hastened to elucidate as Bertha looked a little blank. "Like knocking on wood, or not walking under a ladder, and things like that."

"Yah und so——" Bertha prompted.

"So if I get the ticket it means I should go." Claudia finished up. "If I don't get the ticket"—she broke off with a sigh—"well, then it just means that I ought to stay home with the children. It's a sign and I'd be asking for trouble if I disregarded it."

Bertha got the point. "You mean the house burns down or Bobby maybe gets the measles?"

"Either that or——" Claudia couldn't go on. She wanted to say, "or it's a sign that David wouldn't want me along. he'd rather go without me——" But she couldn't bring the words to her lips. It was unthinkable that this should be so. "If he's begun to fall out of love with me, I've got to win him back," she told herself. "I've got to make him want to be with me more than with any other woman in the world." It seemed only right that this should be so, because she wanted to be with him more than with any other man in the world.

It was strange how she had suddenly fallen in love with him all over again. She owed it all to Mr. Jerry Seymour. He'd awakened in her all the feelings she'd known five years ago—only a hundredfold intensified. The sensation that had flowed through her had been like a sweet, heady wine, only the feeling hadn't gone to Mr. Jerry Seymour; it had turned right around in her veins, and had gone straight back to David. It was silly, but that was the best way she could describe it. It was a marvellous thing when you came to think about it. It meant that she didn't have to close herself off from liking other men—in fact it meant that the more she fell in love with other men the more she'd be in love with David. "If this works out," she thought in awed astonishment, "I really ought to be able to go places——"

She told David, of course, the minute she met him at the station that evening. At least she told him about Jerry Seymour, but not about California, as she wanted that part of it to be a complete surprise. She didn't want to throw herself at

his head either so she merely hinted that Jerry had been very attractive, without mentioning that she was so much in love with her own husband that she was ready to leave home and children and elope with him.

David didn't say very much when he heard about Jerry's return. He just said, "That's nice" in a rather odd way and almost ran into a truck.

Claudia frowned. "Aren't you even jealous?"

"Sure, I'm jealous—— You blasted jackass of a fool!" he yelled after the truck driver. "I'd like to knock his block off."

"Whose block?" she queried hopefully.

David made no reply. "I'll be back in less than a week," he mentioned.

"If I'd have gone along with you you'd have stayed a lot longer than that, wouldn't you?"

He grunted. "It's probably just as well."

"Oh, yes," she agreed flippantly. "You won't miss me; you probably have a date with a blonde."

"Two of 'em. How's the baby?"

"Fine. He was out today." Her heart was sick. He didn't even beg her to change her mind. He didn't seem to care whether she had an affair with Jerry Seymour or not. She thought unhappily, "If there isn't a cancellation on the plane, it's a definite omen that the bloom has worn off our marriage."

While he was washing up before supper she called the ticket office again. She called again at nine that evening and the first thing in the morning while David was packing.

"Not a thing, Madam. But I could give you passage on the next plane?" the ticket agent suggested.

"The next plane won't do," she told him.

She'd thought of asking David to change his own ticket, but one might as well not be superstitious if one was going to manipulate the machinery of fate. She walked back to the bedroom and David saw at once that something was wrong. He looked at her shrewdly. "Sorry I'm going?"

"What do you think?" she mumbled.

"Any chance of your changing your mind?" His tone was so casual that it made her furious. How dare he be so cool and indifferent!

"There's no chance in the world of my changing my mind," she said in bitter hurt. "What's more, you don't want me to change my mind; I'd only be a dowdy wife tagging along to spoil your pleasure——" She couldn't go any further. Her voice broke and she burst into tears.

He tried to take her in his arms, but she fought him off. "Leave me alone! Don't make matters worse by trying to pretend! I can stand anything but a hypocrite! Go ahead without me, have a good time, forget I'm alive!"

He yanked her around.

"You're talking rot! What do you mean, I don't want you along?"

"I have proof that you don't!" She confronted him with blazing eyes. "I have definite proof!"

"What proof?" he demanded furiously.

There was nothing to do but tell him about the ticket that she couldn't get. He gaped at her as though one or the other, or both of them, had lost their minds. Then, before she had finished speaking, he dashed out of the room, into the hall and down the stairs. She heard a crash, and raced after him. He'd knocked over a candlestick with a lamp on it, and hadn't even bothered to pick it up. She stooped and righted the table and put the lamp together again, and knocked on wood. The base wasn't broken and the shade wasn't even bent.

"More luck than brains!" she hurled at him before she realised that he was telephoning at the desk.

"This is Mr. Naughton. You can cancel that extra reservation I made for the four o'clock plane today——" He slammed down the receiver, grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the instrument.

"Quick!" he commanded. "Phone the airport. Maybe you can get a ticket and it'll show Bobby won't get the measles—and the house won't burn down——"

"Maybe it'll show you want me!" she cried.

"Hush up and phone!"

Bertha came in. She stood at the door, palpitant. She listened, with her fat hands clasped and her lips apart.

"Ach!" she cried, "I knew it would happen—somebody made a cancellation!"

After that Claudia didn't know whether she was on her head or on her feet. She had to unpack her suitcase at the last minute, because David, lifting it, said suspiciously, "What have you got in there, a ton of bricks?"

"No bricks," she said, "just clothes and shoes—and an electric iron," she added thriftily.

"My God!" said David.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't you know that every extra ounce costs on a plane?"

"You didn't tell me."

"I'm telling you now. What else did you sneak in?"

"The children's pictures," she admitted guiltily.

"I pack it all over again," Bertha placated. "It takes me only a minute."

"If you don't need me," said Claudia, "I'll just say good-bye to the baby."

The baby was asleep. She bent over him. So warm and living and sweet. She laid her lips against his soft cheek. "How can I leave him?" she thought in fear and desolation.

Bobby came to the door, carrying his ball and a wooden spoon. "Are you going away now?" he asked her without emotion.

"Yes," she said. A lump came up in her throat. She caught him up in her arms and as quickly put him from her.

"Are you crying?" he asked in wonder.

"Of course not; what would I be crying for?"

She could hear Bertha talking to David. "She doesn't need so many shoes," said David.

She brushed the tears away. No. He mustn't see her with reddened eyes; it would spoil things for him if he thought she regretted her decision.

The door of her mother's room stood partly open. She walked in. Before her return from the hospital Bertha had put away all the little mementoes, but the room was not empty and it held no sadness. She stood for a long moment, breathing in the silence and the peace of it. Panic vanished from her breast. She knew again that sense of supreme attunement and undying intimacy. It was as if, once more, her mother stood beside her, and there flowed over her and through her all the beneficence of her love and her protection.

Fritz passed the door with the luggage and stopped. His homely face, with its crooked teeth and leathery wind-burned skin, gave out a quality of strange beauty; his voice when he spoke was low like a priest's. He said, "It is like she was here, no?"

"Yes," said Claudia and added, "perhaps she is."

"Yah," said Fritz simply.

It was strange how many crystallised moments of her life Fritz had shared with her. She felt a swift sense of affiliation with him and wondered if, in some way, they had not always touched. The thought occurred to her that there was no accident in the abiding loyalty of those who crossed one's life in service.

David came upon them standing there. They didn't say anything. The sun, passing the west window, flamed into the room in a brief, effulgent glory. David said haltingly, "It's hard to believe she isn't here with us——"

Claudia nodded. She couldn't speak for happiness. She had been waiting for this to happen, for it was only fitting that David, who had so generously opened his heart to her mother in life, should not now shut out her presence and her love.

But Claudia was wise. She knew from those days in the hospital that such rare moments of vision and exaltation must be moored to earth. She knew why David was apprehensive for her. He didn't want her to be a moony-eyed person with one foot here and one foot there, so to speak, and her glands all shot to pieces. Normality. That was the basis on which all sound marriages were built. Now, particularly since the coming of her second baby, she must cherish normality more than ever. David needn't worry about her. With his shy acknowledgment that there might be something after death he had removed the feverish compulsion of argument or proof. You have five fingers and you don't talk about them—you know you have them. That was the way it was going to be hereafter between David and her mother and herself.

She felt his touch upon her shoulder. His voice was gentle. "We'd better go, dear."

She smiled at him and said, "I'm ready."

THE END

